

Doing what we're doing.

Barbara Ballenger

So we're already a few weeks into the season after Pentecost. Perhaps the fire has cooled a bit, subsided to a warm glow. This church season is also called ordinary time – ordinary like ordinal numbers, because the Sundays are numbered in proper. But it also feels ordinary like back to normal, ho-hum, same old same old. No special candles or calendars with treats, no self-sacrificial rituals or gory stories, no candy or presents. Just a sea of green from here until late November.

Ordinary.

This is the time the church talks about being a disciple, following in the footsteps of Jesus, doing what he did. You know the ordinary stuff – healing the sick, feeding the hungry, casting out demons, working miracles, running for your life from persecutors.

At least this is how Matthew's community experienced following Jesus. The stakes were high in first-century Palestine. Rome was not a benevolent oppressor, and there were consequences for messing with the powers that be – the political ones or religious ones. And perhaps that is why the people of Israel felt lost, without clear leadership or a sense that they were right with God. When the Hebrew Scriptures start talking about Israel being like sheep without a shepherd, it's usually because the people are suffering from the lack of a faithful king or a guiding prophet.

Or that they are looking for God without a lot of success.

This is the situation that broke Jesus' heart, because it broke God's heart. God had heard the prayer to the master of the harvest to send people to work the fields, to reach out to the lost and disoriented people of Israel. We met some of those people last week – they were folks like Matthew the tax collector, whose relationship with Rome cut him off from the covenant. They were the sinners at the table around Jesus. They were like the woman with the hemorrhage whose illness cut her off from the community for 12 years. They were lepers, or paralytics, or people born blind.

God answered their prayer by coming as Jesus, who in turn called apostles to help him do the work.

Because the need for God's love was not going to go away after Jesus rose from the dead. The victory of the cross was not an end to worldly suffering. Christ's victory was in paving a way to God that suffering and death could not destroy. In fact, suffering and death would just make the path clearer and wider.

Suffering and death were part of the package.

That's not exactly a great selling point if you're trying to talk people into believing in Jesus. But since suffering and death are also part of the human experience, no matter what you believe, it helps to know that we have a God that does not run from our suffering, or cause our suffering, but walks with us through it and is on the other end of it as well.

The Apostle Paul, who came along after the initial 12, knew the discomforts of discipleship very well, having endured stonings, whippings, legal battles, imprisonment, internal conflicts, external conflicts, and a shipwreck as he worked to manage and visit his little start-up churches. He saw his struggle as something empowering – “for suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us,” he wrote. He said that not to put a nice spin on the Jesus movement of to see out suffering for the sake of suffering, but because that’s how he experienced it himself. It was the reason for the hope he had, which meant that suffering didn’t scare him. Bring it on, since it was on its way anyway.

It’s tempting to say well that was Christianity then – the life of faith is a much tamer experience now. And while I do not know people who have been dragged off to court or beaten or killed specifically because they believe in Jesus, I do know of people in my lifetime and my faith communities who have been dragged off and imprisoned or excommunicated or even killed for loving with the love of Jesus, for reaching out to people who were like sheep without a shepherd.

When I was growing up in northeastern Ohio, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Cleveland had a mission team that it sent to El Salvador to work with poor communities there. Priests and nuns and lay people went in rotation to that country, during the worst years of state-sponsored violence, to assist people displaced by conflict, to set up schools and care for orphans, to help suffering people to endure and find hope. Among them were Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and Maryknoll lay missionary Jean Donovan. They were among the four church women who in 1980 were abducted and killed by state-sponsored assailants for their work with the poor. The other two were Maryknoll sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford. I was 14 years old the year that they died, and the story of their martyrdom was part of my formative years of faith as a young Christian. They were our churchwomen, members of our diocese – our martyrs.

Father Paul Schindler was head of the mission team in El Salvador when the four went missing. He found their bodies, and he arranged for their return home. Then he had to flee the country himself, as the price on the heads of clergy, even American ones, was high. Archbishop Oscar Romero had been murdered earlier that year.

I met Father Schindler a few years later, when he was a parish priest in my city, helping with teen retreat weekends that I attended and serving in an urban parish. I recall his stories of life in El Salvador, the love and the joy of the people, their struggle and their resilience. What can we do to help? How can we become missionaries, we asked. And he would reply: Do what you are doing. Do what you are doing as young people of faith. Do what you are doing with the need and the call that is right at hand. But do what you are doing with love and in the name of Christ. When he retired a few years ago, he moved back to El Salvador. Because he had hated to leave. He was like a shepherd without his sheep, and it broke his heart to be away from them for so long. He wanted to return to what he was doing.

Do what you are doing. Theologian NT Wright puts it another way, in his reflection on this Gospel passage from Matthew: - *“Where are the fields today ready for harvest?” he asks. “What should our*

*prayer then be? When we can answer that, we may discover, too, how we ourselves might be part of God's answer."*

And so we might ask ourselves what living like Jesus means for us in our time, which is marked with its own generation of exclusion, and violence, and hatred. We are living in a time when public schools are being restricted from teaching young people about racism and racial history; when hospitals are forced to deny trans people medical treatment; when legislation has eliminated women's reproductive rights and limited their access to healthcare. We are living in a time when our responses to limit climate catastrophe are too little too late, when the planet is experiencing mass extinctions and unprecedented weather events. When our own city of Philadelphia is the poorest of the nation's large cities, with nearly a quarter of its people living in poverty.

What I mean to say is the harvest is plenty.

Who here needs a shepherd, or at least a nice herd of sheep to be with, eat with, find support from, draw strength from? If we are God's answer to the cry of the lost for help and care and direction, how are we prepared to respond?

Believing in Jesus doesn't get you in trouble these days, but living like him does. Loving the margins like Jesus, does. Making room for the Kingdom of God for everyone, not just a few, does.

And that is what the author of Matthew's Gospel is telling his people and us. Meanwhile Paul in his letter to the Romans tells us what will fuel that discipleship: *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us*, he writes. This is the source of the grace by which we stand.

So if we lack for words to speak up for love and justice, God will provide them. If we lack courage to take on powers and principalities that stand in the way of love and justice, God will provide that too. If our comfort or complacency gets in the way of responding to the suffering of our neighbor, God will remove that as well. Because it's hard to stay comfortable or complacent when your heart is broken.

Jesus instructs his followers to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves as they and we go to the places where we are sent. NT Wright describes this as the very character that discipleship requires -- *"Without innocence," he writes, "shrewdness becomes manipulative; without shrewdness, innocence becomes naivety. Though we face different crises and different problems to those of the first disciples, we still need that finely balanced character, reflecting so remarkably that of Jesus himself. If we are in any way to face what he faced, and to share his work, we need to be sure that his own life becomes embodied in ours."*

Ultimately we embody that life with the help and companionship of this body. We strengthen it with prayer and song and shared bread and a common cup. We fill up on grace and love and the power of the Holy Spirit so we can go into a world that is harassed and helpless to offer the one who shepherds us. Or as Father Paul Schindler would say: so we can keep on doing what we're doing.

Amen.