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First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, AL
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Speak Up, Reach Out, Build Bridges
Psalm 126, Matthew 9:35-10:23

The first time I ever preached in Birmingham, it wasn't from that pulpit. It wasn't even in this sanctuary! The first time I preached in Birmingham, it was in a cavernous convention hall over at the JCCC, for the final service of the General Assembly when it met here 14 years ago in 2006. Elizabeth Goodrich was coordinating the service for the Committee on Local Arrangements... little did I know our paths would cross again! Coincidentally, the text for that day was Luke's version of this text, in that gospel the sending of the 70 disciples out for mission service.

Fresh from my first year of seminary and a YAV year in Guatemala before that, you might guess that I was bubbling with enthusiasm about the work of the global church, convinced that there was a place for each one of us to participate in the healing and liberating work of God in the world.

A lot has happened since then.

Just this year seems like a lifetime! Think of even just the last two weeks:

- the administration's rollback of LGBTQ protections in healthcare on Friday, on the five-year anniversary of the Pulse nightclub massacre
- the highest number yet of positive coronavirus cases since Alabama reopened 5 weeks ago
- controversy over a powerful pastor's questionable social media likes leading to public consequences here in Birmingham
- voter suppression in Georgia
- peaceful protests all over the country, some of which turned violent.
- Tear gas and rubber bullets used to disperse protests, in one instance in conjunction with the national guard clearing the way for a Presidential photo op with a Bible in DC...
- and what prompted those protests, renewed attention on the white supremacist systems that govern us and oppress black and brown people in

our country – following the deaths of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis just two weeks ago and Breonna Taylor in Louisville a bit before that, on top of so very many more before them...

As one guy tweeted: Billy Joel needs to write a new version of *We didn't start the fire* just to cover the past two weeks of 2020.

It's overwhelming. The insidious power of the sinful structures which bind us is so very strong. It is difficult to fully grasp the extent of the brokenness of this beautiful, old world.

If I'm honest, some days it seems like a fantasy, completely futile to try to do anything to stop it, much less to stand against it, or work to heal it. Seems like every day there's more to learn, more to do, more calls to make, more letters to write, more problems to be outraged about. It's hard to know what to do or say. Hard to believe that what we do or say will make any difference at all.

Matthew tells us when Jesus travelled through Galilee, he was a sight to behold. On his command, a man who had been paralyzed walked. A woman who had been bleeding, shunned by her community for more than a decade was healed, and all it took was her hand brushing the edge of his cloak. A little girl was brought back to life, the eyes of the blind were opened, and evil of all kinds was banished.

It was miraculous. Incredible! Almost inconceivable! Crowds of people followed him wherever he went. ...because, as one translation says, he healed people's diseased bodies, and their bruised and hurt lives.

Scripture says when he saw the crowds, Jesus didn't hide from them. He didn't send out his disciples to clear a path so he could get to the temple without sullyng his robes. When he saw the crowds, Jesus had compassion for them. His heart broke for them. They were confused and aimless, harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He saw their need, and responded with love, offering them healing and liberation.

The need is all around us, friends.

All around us, people need healing. Healing from disease, healing from the virus, healing from cancer, from addiction, from every kind of illness.

People need healing for their bruised and broken lives. Healing from the sickness of hate and racism, sexism and homophobia. Healing from the wounds those -isms inflict. Healing from the pain of loneliness, relief from the weight of hopelessness, liberation from the knee of poverty and centuries of bias holding them down on the hot concrete.

In every place, there are demons that must be cast out, evil which must be denounced. Entrenched systems of white supremacy, business that exploits workers, policies that privilege the few at the expense of the many, leaders willing to sacrifice the elderly and vulnerable for the sake of profit.

When his heart was breaking, as Christ looked at the need crowded around him, do you know what he did? He prayed, saying, "God, I need some help here!"

And then Jesus sent his disciples to heal and to liberate. To raise the dead and help the blind to see. To proclaim the nearness of God's kingdom.

One might think the disciples must've been incredibly gifted. Given that job description, they must have been miracle workers. Practically perfect in every way!

They weren't. These guys were a ragtag bunch. Throughout the gospels, the disciples misunderstand and misconstrue Jesus' teachings. They mess up. Peter abandoned Jesus in his hour of need. Thomas doubted him. And we all know Judas.

The disciples were ordinary, imperfect people. Andrew, James, and John were poor fishermen, Matthew was a tax collector, Simon was a zealot, who wanted to smash windows, topple statues, and overthrow the government.

Still, Jesus prayed for them. He sent them out to do God's work, with the wind of the Spirit ruffling their hair. He sent them to heal, to cast out evil, to bring new life, to liberate, to proclaim good news.

I don't know about you, but there are lots of days where I feel inadequate... too harried and helpless to be of any help at all.

But this story shows us that when we feel that way, when we find ourselves aimless in the crowd, overwhelmed by need - Christ sees us with compassion, and offers us healing.

This story also tells me that we might be called on to act, even though we feel inadequate. Even if we are still discovering our blind spots, even if we are overwhelmed by the world's brokenness and the need around us. The Spirit equips the disciples so that even they, with all of their shortcomings, are able to liberate, heal, bring new life, and proclaim the kingdom. The good news is that we will be equipped, too. In fact, we already are.

It has been a tremendous blessing to be about this work with you all over the past 5.5 years, this kingdom building work of healing, liberation, casting out evil, and making space for new life.

We have worked for healing:

In our support of Cahaba Valley HealthCare, with its clinics offering free vision and dental care to those who otherwise can't afford it.

In our advocacy for Medicaid expansion through Alabama Arise,

In our care for each other, supporting one another through cancer treatment, after surgeries, and through the challenges of dementia and long-term illness.

We've walked through the valley of the shadow of death, and borne witness to God's promise of resurrection. Together.

We have worked for healing of bruised and broken lives:

Speaking up about God's love and justice for all people

Creating a place where all are truly welcomed and valued

Discerning how to respond faithfully to needs and injustice in Birmingham,

Educating ourselves about the evils of white supremacy, the legacy of slavery, the failings of our criminal justice system, and seeking to confess our own complicity in systems of oppression, then to confront and dismantle them.

Advocating to regulate the payday loan industry, and for the rights and inclusion of LGBTQAI+ people in the church and broader world.

We have worked to bring new life:

Through thoughtful, authentic worship which celebrates God's goodness and helps us make meaning in a chaotic world

With our support for First Light Shelter and the women and children who stay there

In our service of those who are experiencing homelessness, and Terry's work to form a network of faith-related service providers seeking to end homelessness in our city

Through the joy of being part of a loving community of support and accountability, a marvelous multitude of ages, abilities, interests, identities, experiences, and cultures.

We have proclaimed good news:

By loving our neighbors, by creating a new ministry for college students, by collaborating to love and support our youth, by setting a table where all are fed, by following the Spirit's leading to speak up, reach out, and build bridges.

Friends, you have shown me what the kingdom looks like. What it feels like, what it sounds like, what it tastes like.

It looks like Gloria Watts smiling and welcoming each person by name.

It feels like blowing bubbles off the rooftop of the Redmont Hotel on Easter Morning, like water splashed from the font.

It sounds like giggles and feet dashing down the hall to dive into the candy bowl in Patti's office, like Honney's violin and a choir of voices soaring up to the rafters, like hearing the words – we welcome all whom God welcomes, and that means you.

It tastes like bread and juice, broken and shared so that all might be fed, like Kandi's chicken and rice followed by not-yo-mama's banana pudding.

It looks like you.

Thanks be to God for First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham. Amen.