

The 2nd Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 6, Year A. June 18, 2017 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Exodus 19:2-8a, Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35-10:23

Do you know that many Protestants are celebrating this year as the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation? Whether you're an Episcopalian or a Lutheran, a Presbyterian or a Methodist – or any other flavor, what happened in 1517 was momentous. On the evening of October 31 of that year, an obscure Roman Catholic monk tried to start an academic debate in the accepted way – he wrote out his 95 point opinion and nailed it to the door of the local church – All Saints Church.

October 31 being “All Hallows Eve” – the eve of All Saints' Day, and the church being called “All Saints,” meant that the next day would be its patronal festival and therefore it would see greatly increased attendance. This fact seemed to have slipped this monk's mind (he later claimed). A bunch of non-academics saw these 95 points that next day, and the rest, as they say, is history! Because All Saints' Church was in Wittenberg, (now) Germany, the monk in question was Martin Luther, his document quickly became known as the “95 Theses,” and ultimately October 31 became “Reformation Day” – the day remembered as The Day the Reformation started.

At least, that's how this history is remembered in the popular imagination. The truth is – as is often the case – more complex. Firstly, there wasn't just one Reformation – “The Reformation” as it's often called – but patterns of reformation throughout Europe. Those reformations were different in different places, both in content and in chronology.

In reality, we could remember multiple dates as significant: For Lutherans, its obviously October 31, 1517 in Germany because of Luther's Theses; For Presbyterians it could so easily be April 16, 1522 in Switzerland because of Ulrich Zwingli's sermon on eating meat in Lent; for us as Anglicans the choice date and locale should likely be November 3, 1534 in England: that was the day the 1st Act of Supremacy was passed in Parliament at the behest of Henry the VIII, removing the Pope as head of the English Church, and making the monarch the “Supreme Governor” (a term still used today).

The truth in all these dates is at least two-fold: first, yes, they are very significant dates; and, second, much happened before them that provided a context for them – they didn't, in fact, couldn't, happen in a vacuum.

That we remember a specific date is likely the result of a phenomenon described by Ernest Hemingway. When asked by a reporter “How did you go bankrupt?” Hemingway replied: “Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly.”

The reformations happened gradually, then suddenly; a tipping-point was reached. And we rightly remember the tipping point, the “suddenly” date. And we so often forget the gradual but quite inexorable lead-up to each sudden moment.

All of what I've just told you is ‘good to know’ stuff in this year of the 500th celebration of the Reformation. It's also helpful in looking at something that happens in today's gospel because

today's gospel passage describes a similar sort of tipping point, a "suddenly" moment. Here it is:
".....Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.....These twelve [apostles] Jesus sent out with the following instructions: '.....As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.'"

It's easy to miss the switch! The Twelve start out as "disciples" but all of a sudden after their commissioning they're "apostles!"

When we hear the word "Apostle" it's hard not to think only of the Twelve. But the word "apostle" – "*apostolein*" in Greek – simply means "to send out." The Twelve disciples have become the "The disciples who are sent out." And just as Jesus had many disciples, not just twelve, there's every reason to think that he wasn't restricting the word "apostolein" to the Twelve. Paul certainly didn't think so: he said that both Junia (a woman) and Andronicus were "prominent among the apostles" (Romans 16:7).

Truth is, there's a clear expectation on Jesus' part – underscored by Paul and continued into the early Church, that every Christian, every follower, every disciple should at some point also become an apostle – become one "sent out." And, conversely, no one starts out as an apostle! For the Twelve disciples – and all the other disciples around Jesus – there were years of preparation, of listening and learning, of following, before the fateful day came. There's some comfort in knowing that – but also a challenge: the day will come sooner or later – may have come already – when we're asked to go out and do the works God calls us to.

It's also true, though, that Jesus didn't send out the disciples because he thought they were somehow "finished believers," ready and trained for what lay ahead; and history proves that they weren't: there were many mistakes ahead of them. We shouldn't expect to be fully prepared for the ministries to which God calls us either.

I think, then, that two questions ask themselves: why did Jesus choose this moment among so many to "send out" the disciples, especially considering their lack of preparation; and what were they expected to do?

This passage gives the answers for both questions. Firstly, Jesus "***saw the crowds, [and] had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.***" They needed shepherds!! And the work of the shepherds was as I quoted above: 1). To share the Good News of the in-breaking reign of God, of God's presence among us, in us; and 2). To heal, to cure, to restore to health, to being wholeness to what is broken.

Those two answers go hand-in-glove. All Christians – prepared or not – are called at some time to the mission field, to the work of God; and the most important characteristics of Christians in that mission field is that they have above all else to be healers, to work for the healing of the world.

All that the disciples learned ***before*** this moment they learned "gradually;" it was all preparation

for the “suddenly” moment.

That “suddenly” moment will most likely come to us at what we will consider to be an inopportune time! We will likely not feel ready – may not *be* ready – for the work laid out before us. In some ways, that’s exactly what it means to be an apostle! That we won’t *be* ready, but that we’ll *still* go – because waiting until that moment of completion of preparation comes likely means we’ll never take up the work!

And, lastly, I offer you this thought: about “going.” In the gospel story, the “going” of the disciple/apostles is a literal journey; for us, it could easily be a metaphorical one. The work we’re called to as those who are sent can just as easily be right here, right now; that the “sending” is from one place of understanding to another, one form of ministry to another, *in this place*. That, in the end, is how community is built!