

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

THE AUTHORITY OF SHEEP

Matthew 9:35–10:8 (9-23)

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Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

9:35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; 38 therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." 10:1 Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. 2 These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3 Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4 Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. 5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, 6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' 8 Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. 9 Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. 11 Whatever town or village you enter, find out who

in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. 12 As you enter the house, greet it. 13 If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 14 If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. 15 Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. 16 See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17 Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; 18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. 19 When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. 21 Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; 22 and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 23 When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

DIAGNOSIS: Sheep without a Shepherd

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *The Sheep Are Lost*

Matthew is tricky to read in these verses, because he slips back and forth between the time of his own writing and the earlier time of the disciples' apprenticeship with Jesus. It seems that what Matthew knew of that earlier time seemed to him immediately applicable to what he sees and experiences in his community some

50-60 years later. In Matthew 9:35-36, Matthew describes Jesus encountering disease and sickness everywhere he goes. The people remind Jesus of lost sheep without a shepherd. They are so vulnerable and weak. Since in many passages of the Hebrew scriptures, being shepherd-less means being ruled by no one or by someone irresponsible or worse (Numbers 27:15-17, 1 Kings 22:17, Ezekiel 34), Jesus is pointing to a breakdown of all the systems that were meant to preserve life, from the religious and political systems to the biological systems. As Jesus sends his disciples out to deal with this in Matthew 10:16-23, he gives them instructions that anticipate a time after Jesus' own resurrection when the church is established already in Antioch, Matthew's most likely community. There we find again a community in confusion and conflict, with struggles in the synagogues and in the homes of its people, and with trials in front of both Jewish and Gentile leadership. Persecution scatters refugees like sheep without a shepherd.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *The Sheep Have No Shepherd*

What is the cause of all this chaos? During Jesus' time, the Roman Empire exercised governing power or "shepherd-ship." However, it was a type of shepherding that demanded much of the sheep and left many in poverty, even subject to disease. There was a Jewish revolt against this poor shepherding in 66 that lasted until 70, when Rome destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. A great crisis of identity developed for the Jews: What does it mean to be Jewish without the temple? In the scattered Jewish community, there was consensus that Jews were not people of the Roman Empire but of God, who was still God alone. But beyond that, there was a diversity of thinking that was perceived as threatening to the existence of the Jewish people. It was no longer tolerable to say, as Matthew's Jewish-Christian community did, that Jesus was the focal point of God's reign, that in

Jesus God was shepherding God's people. How could this be true in light of such disaster? Who was the real shepherd and how could the shepherd's voice be recognized and the sheep of the fold be identified and gathered?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *The Shepherds' Time Is Up*

Matthew's gospel pierces through all the confusion to claim that time is up for the systems of this world. It is harvest time. There is no earthly government, whether civil or religious, that is worthy to rule any longer. Jesus comes to announce their end. Even the natural systems of sickness and death have had their day. Matthew can be so free with historical time because even time's rules no longer hold, and what is past, present and future merge. Jesus announces and embodies the reign of God, and thus he brings the conflicts with the world's imperial systems to a cosmic level that reaches its climax in his own physical death by official execution, handed over by one of his own disciples, as foreshadowed in this text (Matthew 10:4).

PROGNOSIS: The Sheep of God's Pasture

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *"God with Us" Becomes the Shepherd*

Don't be misled by the void and chaos, because the Spirit of God broods there to create a beginning out of the end. Jesus was raised from among the dead. It was as if God said, "This one has my authority. Jesus is full of my Spirit. When he healed people, it was not by the ruler of demons (Matthew 9:34) but by my breath." God is with us in Jesus (Matthew 1:23), and God does not rule as the Gentiles (Matthew 10:5) or as does disease or hostility, but rules by making all things whole and new.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Jesus Sends the Sheep out for Their Kindred*

Jesus does not keep the Holy Spirit to himself but gives her to

his disciples of all times to propel them out into the world unafraid. They have authority to shape their lives according to Jesus' teaching and the freedom to submit to no other authority. They have received freely and their message, too, should put no one in debt but should broaden the hospitable community in which no one lacks. To exercise Jesus' authority is to go straight into the places of conflict, not to harm but to heal, and in Matthew's time warp, it is now not only "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:6) who are to be comforted but also the Gentiles who are to hear the community's witness to the reign of God (Matthew 10:18). The time of the harvest is a time of feasting and celebration at which Psalm 100 is certainly appropriate: "Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. ... Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ... [T]he LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations" (vv. 1, 3, and 5).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *The Sheep Are Saved*

Systems of power do not dismantle easily or willingly, however. As Paul says, to share in Christ's glory involves also sharing in Christ's suffering (Romans 5:1-8). About this Matthew's Jesus shares some realistic advice. While sending his students-turned-missionaries out into the fray as deputies in the reign of God, Jesus tells them to be as smart as the snakes, knowing when to withdraw before they resort to venom and violence themselves. The sheep of God are to be as innocent as doves even if they are killed. In saying this, Jesus is not recommending suffering as something that is good for us so that we should endure it for its own sake. Disciples are not justified by their suffering but by faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). But while facing hatred is to be expected as one confronts the powers-that-be in Jesus' name, Jesus' followers do so with the promise that he saves "the

one who endures to the end" (Matthew 10:22).