We live in a dangerous world and June has become one of the most dangerous times of the year. Two years ago this week, we mourned for the victims of a shooting at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston; and last year this week, we mourned for the victims of a shooting at Pulse Night Club in Orlando. Now we find ourselves mourning again for the victims of a shooting at a baseball game in Alexandria and at a UPS store in San Francisco. Since we were here last Sunday, there have been nine mass shootings in which eight people have been killed and 37 injured. Innocent people are being shot every day simply for going to school, to the movies, to church, to a night club, to a baseball game, or to work. Some people think more good guys with guns like police will keep us all safe, but the police are killing innocent people too, like Philando Castille, with no justice, no consequences, and no accountability. Some place the blame at the feet of politicians, or the NRA. Others believe the violence is caused by crime, terrorism, explosive partisan rhetoric, homophobia, racism, Islamophobia, mental illness, or domestic abuse. Whatever the cause, we have a problem with gun violence in America today, and we can’t seem to do anything about it. We all feel helpless.

It may not give us much comfort, but we are not the first people to feel this way. In the passage immediately preceding our text today, the author of the gospel of Matthew tells us that when Jesus saw the crowds of people in Galilee, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. The words translated here as “harassed and helpless” in reality mean “troubled and cast down” or “oppressed.” The people of Galilee were living in a dangerous world filled with trouble and oppression and when Jesus saw them he had compassion for them. I imagine Jesus would have compassion on us as well, since Jesus has compassion for all people who feel harassed and helpless in a dangerous world. Matthew described the crowds as “sheep without a shepherd,” and we often take this to mean that the individuals in the crowd were lost and without guidance or direction. That may be true, but the phrase “sheep without a shepherd” was a powerful Jewish idiom that was used regularly in the Hebrew scriptures to describe the suffering the people of Israel experienced whenever their political leaders failed to help them.

The phrase “sheep without a shepherd” appears in Numbers, Kings, 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and in every instance the “sheep” are Israel, the “shepherd” is the king, and the term is used to describe a desperate situation where the nation was suffering from a lack of sound political leadership. The idiom “sheep without a shepherd” was not used to describe being spiritually lost or wandering emotionally, but a social condition of being misguided and abandoned by the top political leaders in their country. I can see some of you smiling now and I want to be clear, I’m not talking about America here. Don’t misunderstand me. This is about Israel. When Matthew said that the crowd were like “sheep without a shepherd,” he was using the phrase as it was always used to describe the trouble and oppression people were suffering due to the lack of good political leadership. Jews in the first century would have heard these words as a stinging indictment of those in political power like Pilate, King Herod, the Sanhedrin, the scribes, the Pharisees, and all the religious and political leaders of the day who were harming the people instead of helping them.

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The problem people were facing in Galilee was the problem of suffering. In some cases, the political leaders of the day initiated and exacerbated the suffering of the people, but often they simply ignored their hardships completely. Jesus refused to ignore the problem of suffering. Not only did he have compassion on people who were harassed and helpless, but in chapter ten, he went into action and did something about it. He sent his followers out into a dangerous world and told them to go to towns all over Israel and do whatever they could to relieve the suffering of the people. It is interesting that even though the people were like “sheep without a shepherd,” Jesus did not send the disciples out as shepherds, but as fellow sheep. He did not say, “I am sending you out as shepherds to guide the lost sheep of Israel. He said, “See, I am sending you out as sheep among the wolves.” There was no paternalism or condescension, no top down hierarchy or distinctions between giver and recipient, or leader and follower in Jesus’ commission. There were only sheep who were sent out to be in relationships of reciprocity with other sheep, amid their sufferings.

Attending to the suffering of others is at the heart of the mission of Jesus and it is by attending to the suffering of others that we discover our mission as his followers. Theologian José Antonio Pagola claims Jesus is best described as the Crucified one who suffers over the suffering of his people and who suffered and died to liberate people from suffering, and so he says, “if we turn our back on the suffering of others, we turn our back on the suffering servant.” When Jesus sent the disciples out he said, “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” These instructions are all a response to the problem of suffering that falls under the broad umbrella of healing. To cure the sick is to free people from every disease. To raise the dead is to challenge all the systems that are killing people and bring them back to life. To cleanse lepers is to touch the untouchable, overcome social stigmas, and restore people to community. To cast out demons is to liberate people from the bondage of spiritual forces, addiction, violence, hatred, and bigotry. Jesus sent the disciples out to heal, to bring people back to life, restore people to community, and liberate people from bondage.

However, before he told them to heal, resurrect, restore, and liberate, Jesus told the disciples to “proclaim the good news, ‘the kingdom of God is near.’” Can you imagine how strange and intriguing it would have been for the harassed and helpless sheep without a shepherd to hear that there was no new political leader like a king coming to relieve their suffering, but instead the kingdom of God had come? Jesus used the word “kingdom” to usurp the dominant language being used to describe the Roman Empire for God. The word for kingdom, basilea, was most often used to describe the “reign” of the Emperor, Caesar. It was expansive imperial language that Jesus appropriated to describe the all-encompassing nature of the new reality that was coming into existence. That is why I believe dropping the “g” and saying something like “kindom of God” is insufficient. It is not robust enough! We need a word that challenges and confronts our reality today the way “kingdom” challenged the Roman Empire. Bill Leonard likes to use, “the new day of God,” but I think we need something like, “the democracy of God” or “the economy of God.”

“Economy” is a broad sweeping word that encompasses our entire reality today, and “the new economy of God” seems like good language for us to use here in our context on South Wall Street, otherwise known as Charlotte, NC—the banking capital of the world. Jesus said, “Go proclaim the good news, ‘the new economy of God has arrived!’” First and foremost, the new economy of God involves actions like healing the sick, raising the dead, restoring the outcasts, and liberating the oppressed. But an important part of the instructions Jesus gave to the disciples was not about what they were sent to do, but how they were sent to do it. The “how” is critical, and yet it is the one part Christians have most often neglected. Jesus said, “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a
staff...whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 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.”

Why would Jesus prevent his followers from taking anything with them? Well, Jesus didn’t really say the word “take” the way we understand it as in “bring” nothing with you. The word for “take” in Greek means “acquire.” Jesus was not talking about a packing list. He was talking about economics. The disciples were not sent out with good news, healing, resurrection, restoration, and liberation to profit from those who were harassed and helpless or troubled and oppressed. The good news the disciples were called to share was good news of the new economy of God which would not be like the old economic news of trade and transaction for material gain. Jesus did not send the disciples out to say, “Here’s some good news and healing, can I have your animal skins and tools?” or “Here’s some medicine, can I have your wife and children?” or “Here’s some alcohol, can I have your house and your land.” No, the disciples were sent to offer suffering people a pure gift with no expectation of anything in return. They were sent to give what Jesus had given them with no demands, no strings, and no hope but the hope to receive hospitality from the ones to which they were sent.

By sending the disciples out with instruction not to acquire anything, Jesus was teaching them how to live as alternatives to the economy based on trade and transaction, by creating authentic relationships with other human beings that were not based on what they could pay for the services rendered. It was a move from transaction to relationship—from the transactional economy of this age to the relational economy of God. The story of Jesus sending the disciples into the world is the basis of our understanding of evangelism and missions. The original meaning of “evangelical” was simply someone who shared the good news of the new economy of God, and the original meaning of “missions” was healing the sick, raising the dead, restoring the outcasts, and liberating the oppressed. Yet we live in a world where prosperity preachers prey on the poor by manipulating people who are struggling to survive with the false promise of material blessings and rewards if they give to ministries that only make the “evangelists” rich with multi-million dollar homes and private jets, leaving the financial situation of the people they serve unchanged or exceedingly worse.

Prosperity preachers are not proclaiming the good news of the new economy of God. They are proclaiming the old news of the current economic system. Jesus said, “acquire nothing” because the new economy of God was based on building relationships, engaging in reciprocity, and the mutual sharing of resources between those who were sent and those who might receive them. The ones who were sent offered the good news with the healing, resurrecting, restoring, liberating power of Jesus. Those who welcomed them offered food, clothing, and shelter. Neither party would get rich off the other or exploit the other, yet both received what they needed to flourish and the beautiful possibility of a true relationship that could be born inside the intimate space of a stranger’s home. The disciples were sent out with something to share, but to share what they’d been given, the disciples would first have learn how to live in the new economy of God by taking the risk of letting themselves become vulnerable enough to receive hospitality from strangers they encountered on the way. How did we lose this extraordinary part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

It may have been the lack of hospitality they received, or the rejection of the good news, or the violent persecutions they experienced at the hands of the religious and political leaders, or the betrayal and hatred they received from their own families—it may have been all the wolves. Jesus did not sugarcoat the danger of mission he sent his followers to accomplish. He was very
clear that they would face resistance and sometimes violent resistance. He didn’t lie and say, “everything is going to be ok, there are no wolves.” He said, “I send you out as sheep among the wolves.” Not only were people harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd, but the religious and political leaders who were supposed to be their shepherds had become like wolves devouring the people they were supposed to serve. Again, I want to be clear I’m talking about Israel, not America. Jesus’ talk of wolves reminds me of a political cartoon. Sheep are grazing in a field looking up a billboard that has a wolf in a suit running for political office with the campaign slogan “I AM GOING TO EAT YOU!” One sheep looks over at the other and says, “I like this guy. He tells it like it is.”

Jesus knew that he was sending the disciples into a dangerous world filled with wolves and he told them flat out “people will hurt you.” Not just the wolves, but the sheep who are suffering will hurt you as well. One of the best pieces of counsel I’ve ever received was from a wise mentor who said, “Hurt people, hurt people.” People who are hurting often hurt other people, so don’t be surprised when you go to be with those who are suffering that you might get hurt. Jesus said, “you will be arrested, flogged, beaten, dragged, and you might even be put to death.” But the question is, “What were the disciples to do if they encountered resistance or violence?” Did Jesus say, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” or “treat others how they treat you” or “retaliate as needed” or “go in a large group so you can protect each other” or “report any violence to the authorities so they can protect you” or “take a weapon like a sword or gun so you can protect yourself?” No. When it came to the most important activity in the history of human existence, Jesus said, “offer everyone peace, and if they don’t welcome you, if they resist or get violent, simply shake the dust off your feet and move on.”

After telling the disciples that they were being sent out like sheep among the wolves, Jesus famously said, “so be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.” There are so many animals in this text I almost called the sermon “Welcome to the Jungle.” From a biblical perspective to be as wise as a serpent was to be cunning and crafty. In fact, Jesus might have been alluding to the snake in the Garden of Eden. But what does it mean to be “as innocent as doves?” The word innocent is a bad translation of the word ἀκεραιός which doesn’t mean innocent, but harmless, and explains the reference to the dove, which was an ancient symbol of peace. Jesus sent his followers out into a dangerous world with the instructions, “Be cunning, but do no harm.” His instructions to the disciples are strikingly close to the instructions that the Greek physician, Hippocrates, gave to his students when he sent them out into homes to provide healing, medicine, and health care to people who were sick and suffering. His words became known as the Hippocratic oath that is still sworn to in medical schools by new doctors, surgeons, medical practitioners, and physicians.

“I will use treatment to heal the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrong-doing. Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and do no harm, especially to the bodies of man or woman, bond or free.” The disciples were sent out like little doctors to heal the suffering of the world and they were told, first and foremost, do no harm. At least, so far as you are able, do not contribute to the suffering of others—do not make it worse. It seems like a simple concept, but if the followers of Jesus had practiced it, the entire history of Western Civilization would have been very different and much less violent. Our call to proclaim the good news and bring healing, resurrection, restoration, and liberation to the world—to be an evangelist on a mission—would not have become synonymous with violent imperial expansion and colonialism. We would have never forced people to convert to Christianity or die, or offered the gospel while stealing their resources and land, or come in the name of Christ to capture people from their families and sell them as slaves for economic gain.

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Sadly, even though we were sent out by Jesus to offer peace and harm no one, instead of living like doves throughout our history, the Church has been the wolves. The most tragic part is that it wasn’t supposed to be that way and it didn’t have to be that way. We were sent out by Jesus, the suffering servant, to go out to be with the suffering of the world, to be with the harassed and helpless, the troubled and oppressed, the sheep who have no shepherd who are being devoured by wolves. We were sent out by Jesus with the good news of the new economy of God—an economy of mutuality, reciprocity, and relationships where we can offer one another hospitality and share things in common. We were not sent out into a dangerous world with weapons of violence like swords, spears, bombs, or guns, but with tools of peace like healing, health care, resurrection, restoration, and liberation.

Jesus did not send us out to kill the wolves but to stand with the sheep, because as soon as we are violent we become wolves ourselves. We are called to be vulnerable, to walk into danger and not be dangerous, to face hostility and not be hostile, to put ourselves in harm’s way and do no harm, and to be killed rather than to kill. When Jesus said, “be wise” he wasn’t talking about the “wisdom of the world.” He was talking about the wisdom of the new economy he called “the kindom of God.” It is the wisdom of peace, healing, and life. Thankfully, Jesus does not send us out into a dangerous world to fix all violence or end all suffering. He sends us out to do what he did—to be with people who are harassed and helpless, troubled and oppressed, and suffering like sheep without a shepherd, in the hope that a beautiful new relationship can be born and from that relationship a beam of God’s redemptive love might shine into the world. We are sent into a dangerous world, and what a dangerous world needs is not more people with guns, but more people of peace. So, let us proclaim the good news that the new economy of God has come, let us offer acts of healing to all people, and when the world gets violent, let us be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves. Amen.