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Called to Proclaim

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When I was in elementary and middle school, one of my favorite games to play with my friends at birthday parties and sleepovers was the game “Telephone”

One person starts the game by whispering a short phrase to the person next to them who, without asking for any repeats or clarifications, has to whisper what they hear to the person next to them

The process repeats from sleeping bag to sleeping bag spread across the floor until the very last person enthusiastically says, out loud, what they have heard

Typically laughter and hysterics ensue as “sweet potato fries” becomes “god I hate my thighs” or “I love Taylor Swift” becomes “want to ride in a ship?”

half the fun was getting it wrong – and I’m pretty sure there were some saboteurs along the way

I have no idea if kids still play this game – with their cell phones I’m sure they can just text each other their silly messages and like them or forward them without any concern for how they’ll be interpreted or changed before reaching the final recipient

This weekend we honor and acknowledge a life changing message that was shared by word of mouth – a real-life “telephone” chain – the message was received on June 19, 1865 and it said: “You are free!”

Tomorrow is the third celebration of the national holiday remembering Juneteenth – the day enslaved black people in Texas finally heard the good

news of the Emancipation Proclamation which ended chattel slavery in the Confederate States

It is a day that has been celebrated by descendents of slaves and their communities ever since

“You are free!”

The Emancipation Proclamation was an act of political craftsmanship as much as it was an act of moral courage on the part of President Abraham Lincoln, but the impact was the transformational truth that slavery was no more

I cannot imagine the relief and I cannot fathom the joy in hearing such news

And, I can only imagine the journey that message took to get to its recipients

The Emancipation Proclamation took effect January 1, 1863 but it took two more years for the news to reach the slaves in Galveston, TX

There was no World Wide Web those days, the news traveled by letter and by mouth, it traveled over land and over waterways, it traveled in the midst of a war over the very institution the proclamation emancipated: slavery

It was not a message everyone in Texas wanted to hear and it was a message certain Texans were desperate to hear

And, thanks be to God it eventually reached them

“You are free”

I've been thinking a lot about the story of Juneteenth as we approach the holiday but also as I've been praying about our texts from this morning

I see a connection between the significance of the message of the Emancipation Proclamation making its way to the ears of those so desperate to hear its truth and the significance of Jesus calling his disciples to carry his message, his ministry, to the communities so desperate to hear its truth

A message so vital and so volatile that Jesus warns his disciples in vs. 16, just a few verses after where our text stops this morning: “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves”

I have a new appreciation for Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, the other James, Thaddaeus, Simon, Judas and all of the women who aren't named and the bravery and courage it must have taken to be the first disciples

And I have an appreciation for Major General Gordon Granger who spoke the words of the Emancipation Proclamation to the community in Galveston 158 years ago

It's tough to be the messenger – tough and I'd imagine dangerous

And yet, it is so, so important to share that good news

I was always one of the kids in the telephone chain who tried to share what I heard as accurately and clearly as I could to the person after me as tempted as I was sometimes to be silly and to deviate from what I heard – I, too, loved to laugh at how our messages changed along the way

And, I suppose, there is a way in which my vocation as a preacher of God's word models my childhood joy of the game of telephone and the seriousness with which I take my role in the chain – still with little flares of humor and joy along the way

But like the disciples and General Granger, I recognize the significance and weight of the truths I help to tell and I approach my calling with trembling knees and a cautious heart

Debie Thomas acknowledged in her commentary on today's text that "[Jesus'] harsh-sounding instructions suggest that there will be times when our faith requires us to violate cultural norms, fight uphill battles, and speak dangerous truths to power."¹

To which, for some odd reason, I have said "sure, why not? Sign me up!"

And lest you all fall into a moment of schadenfreude, let me remind you that in your baptisms YOU have been called to be disciples, too – called you to that same requirement to violate cultural norms, fight uphill battles, and speak dangerous truths to power.

"If our overriding priority as Christians is to secure our own comfort, then we cannot follow Jesus," Thomas writes. "Discipleship will disorient and disrupt us. It will make us the neighborhood weirdos. It will shake things up in our families, churches, and communities. It will expose evils in the status quo we cling to. It will humble us to our knees."

I know that many of us feel a certain sense of uneasiness at the thought of speaking to people about our faith outside of the walls of this church – to friends in the frozen foods section of Hannaford, to friends in book groups who wonder why we still go to church, to our extended family members who associate any kind of Christianity with the kind they hear on the news

While there may have been a time in US history when these kinds of conversations wouldn't have felt as uncomfortable, perhaps you can take heart that even the disciples 2,000 years ago were warned of the seriousness and severity with which they might be met

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2661-i-am-sending-you>

And yet, has the message not been worth it?

When the message is “love!”

When the message is “reconciliation!”

When the message is “you are free!”

Is it not worth shouting from the rooftops?

Are souls not desperate to hear and know and live this truth?

Jesus has given a clear instruction on how to be his disciples in the world:
“Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons”

Got it? OK, good.

Acts of discipleship will look differently for all of us – sometimes they may be acts of moral courage, sometimes they might be political, sometimes they might be both and sometimes neither

Sometimes it will be a gentle conversation with a dear one and the grace you proclaim is in your listening and in your presence

Sometimes it will be a gesture of kindness in a situation where there has been a vacuum of kindness

Sometimes it will be marching in Pride parades, or showing up at the State House for advocacy days, or not being afraid to declare that Black lives matter!

Not every act of discipleship is declaring the Emancipation Proclamation, but every act of discipleship is a proclamation of emancipation from the brokenness and ugliness of our world

We are desperate for a word of good news from our God which is why we are here this morning – and, I believe, our world is also desperate for a word and gesture of good news

It is our gift, our offering, our calling to carry the good news from this place, from that table, and to share it with the world

Our message may get a little mixed up along the way as it does when it passes from mouth to mouth

But our God has a sense of humor and is in the vocation of love not perfection – how you express God's love in the world is exactly how God would want you to express God's love in the world.

Because there are hearts and souls that need to hear such good news.

So let's go, let us cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. We can do this.

Amen.