



First United Church of Oak Park

Lambs, Wolves, Serpents, Doves

Matthew 10:5-17

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Among the many challenges that our new pastor will face is the complicated religious landscape we inhabit as 21st century Christians. If you follow religious news at all, you know the stories: Denominations like the ours are diminishing in size and impact. Non-denominational churches are growing, and so is the number of people who adhere to other world religions. The “nones” are growing, too, those people who resist being boxed into any single religious tradition, but who instead prefer either to mix and match their spirituality or to go without faith. The challenge for any new pastor is that we live in a religiously mixed-up world.

Jesus lived in a religiously mixed-up world, too. The Palestine of his day was not a homogeneous religious context. The Mediterranean world was alive with Jews and Gentiles, Romans and Greeks, and merchants from all over the known world, each of them bringing their own local traditions into the mix.

It is into this mixed-up context of Jew and Gentile, friend and foe, and maybe even of the religiously indifferent, that Jesus sends the twelve. “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware.” (Mt. 10:16-17a NRSV) Whatever does he mean, and whatever might this mean for our own understanding of 21st century church life?

This is an old, familiar text for me, one that is close to my heart. It was the preaching text for my wedding, a nod to Tony, who had spent much of his seminary career researching the serpent as a religious symbol, and who more recently is convinced that when the time comes, the sorting hat will undoubtedly put him into Slytherin. I think of him whenever I read this text.

“Look, I’m sending you as sheep among wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware.” Or, as older translations say, I’m sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.

A couple of years ago a speaker at McCormick referenced this text when he spoke about the challenges of living in a rough and violent neighborhood. For part of his talk it sounded as if he was labeling some people in the world as lambs, and others as wolves. People in the class began to get uncomfortable with that, and so they should, because things are not so simple.

A few years ago I took an urban ministry class on a field trip to Englewood where we talked with Bishop James Dukes, the pastor of Liberation Center. One of the things he talked about was his ministry of violence prevention, and the conversation that started it. A few years before, he said, the church was responding to a gun related death by supporting the family whose son had died, as was appropriate. A woman pulled Bishop Dukes aside. She commiserated with the loss, genuinely, but then she told him that she was the mother of the shooter; her son had killed this child. She said, “You know, this wasn’t the only family to be destroyed when that gun was fired.”

I think of that conversation every time we read the names of the people in Chicago who have died by gun violence. I ache for the death of these lambs. But I also try to remember that the people who held the guns and pulled the triggers are also somebody's lambs, or they once were. A mother, a brother, a partner, or a grandparent has looked on these individuals, and seen their vulnerability and innocence, and cherished them.

It's easy to look at situations like this and say that this person is a lamb, and that person is a wolf, but it's not true. To be lamblike or wolfish are different ends of a single human continuum, and every person in the world is capable of living at either end of it. We can be lambs, to be sure, but we can also be wolves. Our teeth can be as sharp and our bite as ferocious as anybody else's, especially when we run in packs and lose the capacity to think for ourselves.

Jesus doesn't tell the twelve or any other disciples that they are lambs. He sends them out as lambs. I read this as a reminder that we have choices to make as disciples. We are capable of living into the predatory side of our humanity, and many Christians have done that. They have fed their greed, their lust, and their confusion on the bodies and spirits of the most vulnerable. I hardly need to remind you that we are called to behave differently. Jesus does not send us as wolves. We are to be as lambs.

To what purpose? His charge is clear, but far from easy. Jesus sends us to continue his work: to announce the advent of the kingdom, to restore wholeness, and to offer the peace of Christ. But, he says, we need to be very careful, because people are not going to receive our efforts well, maybe not even the people we love the best.

Jesus then goes on at length about danger and persecution. It is to his prediction of danger that this sentence about lambs and wolves and snakes and doves has traditionally been attached. The lambs-wolves sentence begins the paragraph about persecutions in most translations of Matthew, as if it were not a part of the earlier set of instructions about the kingdom and restoration and peace. But I wonder if that's the best or only way to read it.

There are very few places in the Bible where we see the juxtaposition of lambs and wolves in the same text. We see it in Matthew and Luke in this story. We see it twice again in John and Acts, when the authors talk about lambs being victims of wolves. And we see it twice in Isaiah, where first and third Isaiah dream of what life will be like on God's holy mountain. Listen to portions of the vision that we find in Isaiah 65:

No one will ever hear the sound of weeping or crying in it again.
No more will babies live only a few days, or the old fail to live out their days. . . .
They will build houses and live in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They won't build for others to live in, nor plant for others to eat. . . .
They won't labor in vain, nor bear children to a world of horrors,
Because they will be people blessed by the Lord. (Isaiah 65: 19-23 selected lines CEB)

When he talks about lambs and wolves, Jesus echoes Isaiah in this text, and I think Jesus echoes the prophet deliberately. Jesus sends us out as lambs to be harbingers of this messianic kingdom. He sends us out to help people build a world in which children will be safe, and people will have homes, and workers will have jobs and enjoy the fruits of their labor, and the wolf and the lamb will graze together. That's our work. We are to go out into a dangerous world as vulnerable little lambs, in order to build a world in which lambs can someday be safe. There is a lot of work yet to be done, and it's risky, because unfortunately those who choose to be the wolves of the world are not yet on board.

Jesus sends us out as lambs, as he is a lamb. We are to bear in our ministry the grace and goodness of Jesus himself. But Jesus also suggests that being lamb-like is not enough. When William Blake wrote about lambs in *The Songs of Innocence*, he characterized them as meek, mild, and childlike. Those qualities, as wonderful as they are, are insufficient for the tasks of kingdom building or restoring wholeness to the world, especially in dangerous contexts.

Jesus tempers his charge. “Be wise as snakes and innocent as doves.” A couple of years ago I suggested to a group of people that we promote some McCormick continuing education as “serpent wisdom,” and the committee shot it down immediately, because serpents get such a bad rap. One woman on the committee almost began to hyperventilate, just talking about snakes. In light of her reaction, the committee decision was probably correct, but I still think I had a good point; being wise as snakes can come in handy. The biggest disappointments I have ever had in ministry have come when I have downplayed this sage advice from Jesus.

The wisdom of which Jesus speaks in this text is not some sort of heady, abstract wisdom. The Greek word that Matthew uses here is *phronesis*, commonly translated as “prudence,” an Aristotelean virtue that encompasses experience, curiosity, understanding, and reason. It is practical wisdom used for practical politics, and it shapes and is shaped by moral reasoning. It is the kind of wisdom that helps us act honorably. It also helps us read situations and people, confront everyday challenges, build strategies, forge savvy partnerships, and negotiate institutional politics.

In calling us to such wisdom, Jesus cautions us against naiveté. In the same breath he invites us to innocence, dove innocence. I have two ideas about what that might mean. The first comes from G.K. Chesterton, to whom the observation is attributed, “Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly.” There is something to that. But there is also something about the nature of doves that might be instructive for us. Doves are migratory birds who venture into the world on a regular basis. In all their travels, however, they retain a memory of where and what their home is. There they return, year in and year out. Doves have a home, a center, if you will, that God has given them for refuge and return, for protection and shelter. This center anchors their lives and defines the direction of their journey. Be innocent as doves, said Jesus. He knew that, in him, we each have a home of refuge and protection in God, an anchoring center that defines our ministry. He invites us to remember that.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus counsels his disciples a few verses later in Matthew. “Do not be afraid.” He knows he sends us out into a world that may be indifferent or even hostile to the possibilities of kingdom, restoration, and peace. Yet he sends us as lambs, not wolves. He sends us out to be his hands and feet in the world, as vulnerable and as human as he was. As he sends us, I hope he also blesses us with the capacities he advises us to cultivate: cunning minds and moral integrity and faithful hearts. The work to which Jesus invites us is worth doing, and worth doing well. May our work embody the grace and power of the one who sends us: Jesus the lamb.

Amen.