

**Pretty Words for Messy Work:
A Sermon on Matthew 9:35-10:8
Rev. Anita Peebles
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Today is Graduate Recognition Sunday. Now, I know there are a lot of jokes that can go around about graduation speeches, lots of cliches and worn-out metaphors and cheesy illustrations...I have experienced several graduations in my life, the most recent of which was only two years ago, in advance of my moving to Seattle and serving in ministry with you. I can confirm that many graduation speeches have these hallmarks of cheesiness. And also, many don't, and it's a shame that many don't remember the wisdom shared. But, it's also understandable. Because graduations are a time of life transition, a liminal time where there is tension between leaving the sureness of the past and venturing into the unknown future. Whether you or a loved one are transitioning from kindergarten to grade school, from middle- to high-school, from high-school to college or into a degree program or finishing education, graduation times are liminal. Life transitions can be exciting, because it is often good news that situations change, that things don't have to be as they always were, that something new is on the horizon. And it's also natural to experience fear, anxiety, and trepidation when you are called forth, called to attend to something new beyond yourself and embrace a new way of living.

Enter our Scripture for the day, which Delia read so well, the story of Jesus calling the disciples. I think it's easy to gloss past this part of the gospel of Matthew, hurrying on to get to the good stuff of healings, preachings, parables and more. Why do we need to know the names of the disciples or where they're from or what their professions were? That's boring information, I'm here to learn about Jesus!

Though the disciples' personal stories may go the way of common graduation speeches and fade soon from memory, let's take a moment to get to know these folks. Because they, like today's graduates, like all of us in this current societal moment, are being called to something beyond themselves. In this group of disciples, we have two sets of brothers: Simon Peter and Andrew; James and John. We have a tax collector, Matthew, who worked for the Empire and was probably not a popular person because of his profession. We have Simon from Canaan, who in Luke's gospel and Acts is also referred to as a "zealot," so he would have been a passionate revolutionary who probably didn't get along so well with Matthew being in the pocket of the Empire. We have Thomas, who we know had a lot of doubts about the Jesus movement. And we have Judas, who eventually would trade insider information about Jesus resulting in his arrest and violent death at the hands of the state.

And Jesus, gathered this motley crew, "gave them authority over unclean spirits to throw them out and to heal every disease and every sickness," taught them to travel unencumbered across the land, relying on the hospitality of strangers, refusing payment for their services and living simply.

One must ask, perhaps a la Thomas, if the disciples knew what they were getting into when they faced that moment of transition. We hear in other Scriptures about how Peter left his home and family, James and John left their father, the fisherman Zebedee. They lived with a common purse and shared all things, and sometimes were chased out of town, and were watched by imperial spies. So what made them become followers of the Way?

I'd argue they knew what they were doing, at least in part. Jesus offered a vision of how life could be, a vision that was so tempting and world-bending that it was worth leaving behind the security of life the way they had always lived.

And so today, I ask you, do you see the vision? Do you feel the world that is possible, and, to quote author Arundhati Roy, that is so close you "can hear her breathing"?

Let me be clear: I'm not only asking our graduates this question, because in my brief experience of these people in our community, they have vision. The graduates we celebrate today have a vision of a world characterized by peace, they make music, they think deeply, they demonstrate for justice in the streets, they take action in their schools, they work with children, they advocate for accessible teaching pedagogies. Nola, Sarah, Eva, Jessica, David, Anna have a vision of a better world.

So I ask again, do you see the vision of the world that is possible? And I suggest that it is closer than we may think.

Detroit-based activist, author and movement strategist [adrienne maree brown](#) suggests that USAmerican society is suffering from a crisis of imagination. This resonates deeply with me, as there are many places in my individual life and our collective life as a country that I have taken for granted, been apathetic and even cynical towards, thinking those intoxicating words "this is how it'll always be." On last week's episode of the podcast "[The Word is Resistance](#)," a project of the Faith division of the Showing Up for Racial Justice organization, Jean Jeffress, a minister from Oakland, CA, shared this characterization of our current situation in the United States: "The US empire has literally never been anything but a white supremacist holdout that literally fought a war against itself to try to keep black people enslaved and has for centuries written into its laws and customs the violent exclusion of every nonwhite person and, lets face it, every non-Christian tradition. And then there's capitalism...and it just screws everyone over." Indeed, a crisis of imagination deeply plagues this country for us to wind up in a place where justice has still not reached our Black, brown and indigenous siblings.

Again, Jean Jeffress, "There is nothing creative about white supremacy. There is nothing creative about colonialism or the building up and crumbling of empires over the millennia. There is nothing creative about imperialism or the violence it takes to maintain imperial order and rule over imperial subjects. There is nothing creative about capitalism or patriarchy, all tools of empire. All of these things are based on extraction. Of labor, resources, human beings for forced labor, culture, language, history, stories, religion, music, extraction of the very breath from the bodies of God's children."

adrienne maree brown encourages me, encourages us, to combat this crisis of imagination and push in whatever ways we can for a renewed spirit of creativity towards

liberation. I highly recommend her book [Emergent Strategy](#), a concept which she describes as “how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for.”

Beloved church, these are pretty words for messy work.

Over the past couple weeks, I’ve had family and friends from across the country reach out to me because of the things they’re seeing on the news about Seattle. “Why are the police tear gassing protestors with umbrellas?” “Do you know anyone in the front lines?” “Why would there need to be street medics?” “What does it mean to ‘Defund the Police’?” And, of course, “What is this Autonomous Zone all about?”

I have to admit I’ve had trouble knowing what to say, at times. There’s a lot of misinformation going around about what has been and is happening a mere few blocks from our church home in Capitol Hill. The images we have been seeing conjure feelings from anger to un-surprise to shock to galvanizing for action. Police using rubber bullets at close range against protestors, spraying children with pepper spray, releasing tear gas on protestors. Journalists running away as flash bang grenades are thrown towards them. Friends writing each other’s phone numbers on their arms in case of arrest or medical emergency. A car surging through a group of protestors and the driver shooting someone trying to protect others...then being arrested calmly with little force. Legal observers staying vigilant through hours and hours of rising tension. Neighbors filming from above in hopes their view of the streets below will be enlightening.

And, we have also seen regular people exercising their imaginations as they creatively show up for each other. Local businesses opening their doors to share food with protestors, to shield them from gas. Nurses who finish COVID-19 testing all day volunteering their time as [street medics](#). Barricades in the street covered with graffiti, guerilla gardens popping up in street medians, black and brown activists telling their stories to white folks who actually put their lives on pause to listen and learn, poetry written on the pavement, the documentary *13th* showing on a screen in Cal Anderson park, people making food for each other and giving it away freely, community health advocates helping people in need. “Black Lives Matter” painted in a rainbow of colors and patterns down Pine Street. (If you haven’t seen a [photo of this mural](#), it is stunning.)

Here we have a vision of what could be. People showing up, with their own life experiences, multifaceted identities, and varying levels of access to resources, embracing the vision of the Autonomous Zone, a vision of a world beyond punitive policing. This is a vision from our Black, brown and indigenous siblings, and I want to follow this vision. A vision of what is possible when people treat each other with kindness, generosity, compassion, when people demand accountability from systems that have gone unchecked. I’m not saying that everything is perfect in the Autonomous Zone, but I must admit that the vision is beautiful. It is a vision of what a world characterized by imagination can do and what a creative community can be.

Hear [this poem](#) from adrienne maree brown:

There is an edge
Beyond which we cannot grasp the scale
Of our universe.
That border,
That outer boundary
Is imagination.
The only known edge of existence
The only one we can prove by universal experience –
We can imagine so much!
We can only imagine so much.
If perhaps it is a function of our collective minds
A dream of our endless nights
Then there will be abundance so long as we can imagine it –
Abundance on earth
If we can imagine it
Or abundance of earths
A sphere for every tribe
And every combination.
And to have it all
All we need is to remember
there is an edge
And grow our dreams beyond it.

Friends, we must expand our imagination. As we grow our dreams beyond the edges that surround us, hear this good news: though the systems of entrenched power and privilege thrive on extraction and apathy, to quote Jean Jeffress again, “God extracts nothing. The power of God is the power of life. Is the power of grass growing up through concrete, is the power of extinct species reappearing, which has happened recently. Is the power of black and brown people in the US surviving and being glorious even though nearly every ounce of political and institutional will has been used to crush and dehumanize. God is the power of creation, not extraction. God is creation and creation is alive.”

Beloveds, the gospel today is that another world is possible. The good news is that we are experiencing a sacred call to work for justice and to cultivate God’s vision. The good news is that things don’t always have to be this way, the good news is that after decades and decades of advocacy against police brutality, Black and brown activists are seeing traction. The good news is that WE have been called to be disciples of Jesus, to follow the Way of Jesus, to spread compassion, to heal, to decry the evils of systemic sin, to engage in the movement with each our own gifts and talents. The good news is that in a liminal time, Jesus gathered a motley crew of people from all walks of life, to think creatively and to live into a vision of another world. Indeed, that’s what God is doing with us TODAY.

May we travel by the Way of Justice as we join in the building of a Beloved Community. Amen.