

Scripture: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Here Jesus commissions his followers to go where he would go and do what he would do. Risking hardship and danger, they offer peace and healing as signs that the kingdom of God is near.

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.

"When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house.

"When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God has come near.'

"Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me."

The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." Jesus replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

SERMON

Composer Giacomo Puccini wrote a number of famous operas. However, in 1922 he was suddenly stricken by cancer while working on his last opera, *Turandot*, which many now consider his best. When he got sick, Puccini said to his students, "If I don't finish *Turandot*, I want you to finish it for me."

Shortly afterwards he died. Puccini's students studied his other operas carefully to understand his style, and soon completed it. In 1926 the world premiere of *Turandot* was performed in Milan with Puccini's favorite student, Arturo Toscanini, directing. Everything went beautifully until the opera reached the point where Puccini had been forced to put down his pen.

Tears ran down Toscanini's face. He stopped the music, put down his baton, turned to the audience and cried out, "Thus far the Master wrote, but he died." A vast silence filled the opera house.

Then Toscanini picked up the baton again, smiled through his tears and exclaimed, "But his disciples finished his work." When *Turandot* ended, the audience broke into thunderous applause.

What happened with Puccini and his opera is sort of like our relationship to Jesus, the work he started in his life, and our purpose as his followers today. The Master died, and his disciples continue his work.

In our reading today, Jesus has been traveling with his 12 disciples and a large crowd who have followed him, and watched him, and asked him questions. And now he involves them in his mission.

So he sends 70 of his followers to go out. And they're to do three things:

1st pray

2nd go village to village (and he has specific instructions on how this is to go)

3rd be humble about it all – in other words “It’s not about them”

First, Jesus tells them to PRAY. The mission he’s about to send them on is important and difficult, but what is more important are the hearts of those who are sent. Their purpose and mission flows, not from their personal abilities, but from identifying with Jesus and his people.

Then, like now, there is more to be done than there are workers to do it. And the sense of urgency is great. We live in a time of enormous opportunity and need. And so we ought to start with prayer.

Frank Laubach, was a missionary to the Philippines whose work was focused on literacy, and teaching people to read in their own language. He quickly became aware of the need to pray and to practice God’s presence when he first arrived in the Philippines.

In those early months, Frank described himself as “a lonesome man in a strange land.” He had a lot of time on his hands with which to give focused time to prayer and to noticing God’s presence and work. After a while though, the demands of his ministry began to increase, and Frank was with people every moment of every waking day. In that context, he wrote:

Either this new situation will crowd God out or I must take Him into it all. I must learn a continuous silent conversation of heart to heart with God while looking into other eyes and listening to other voices. If I decide to do this it is far more difficult than the thing I was doing before. Yet if this experiment is to have any value for busy people it must be worked under exactly these conditions of high pressure and throngs of people.

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What wise words for us today: *a heart to heart with God while looking into other eyes and listening to other voices.*

Because the work – sharing the kingdom of God – will not be easy; there will be difficulties and problems along the way. The world can be hostile toward those who follow Jesus. In Jesus’ time, the disciples faced the very real threat of persecution and death.

For us today, the hostile world has more to do with culture. Here in New England, where the Christian faith is not mainstream, we're working against a perception that Christians are the strident conservatives that make the nightly news.

This environment and the times can make us shy about talking about Jesus, reticent to appear TOO religious, or TOO Christian. That makes me a little sad. And confirms for me that we need to be praying – a LOT.

But praying for more workers, as Jesus instructs, isn't praying for OTHER workers. We need to make ourselves available, because after praying we are told to GO!

And here Jesus gives very detailed instructions. His seventy disciples are told to go out two by two without any belongings other than the message they are to proclaim: that the kingdom of God has come near.

And this is still our mission as the church today. And while some have welcomed the message others have not! People can't be forced. It is a message that has to be received freely.

The gesture of shaking off the dust (vv.10-11) was a Jewish tradition. After traveling beyond their own territories and land, and upon returning to Palestine, the Hebrews would shake the dust off their feet to symbolically leave behind the heathen ways of other cultures.

And so by Jesus' disciples doing this as they leave a home or town where they are not welcome, they are distinguishing the message of Jesus as one which is radically different than any other message they'd have heard from prophets and teachers of the day.

As is the way, those who do not welcome the disciples do not realize the opportunity they miss – God's kingdom at their doorstep. And the people who do receive God's messengers will experience healing and discover the nearness of God's kingdom.

And the mission is just that: to proclaim Jesus' own message: "The Kingdom of God has come near to you."

Remember, it is NOT the disciples (nor the Church) that initiate the mission. The initiative comes from the Lord.

The disciples act, "in the name of Jesus"(v.17). Almost like following a period of apprenticeship, the disciples are authorized to represent their master. Or like the students finishing Puccini's opera on his behalf.

And in this way, it is not about them and, similarly, IT'S NOT ABOUT US.

The disciples return from their mission elated by their success, but as a response to their excited stories, Jesus quickly rains on their parade: "Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

They are to be less joyful at the power they have received and seen working through them, and more joyful because they belong to and live in the hands of God. Their names are written on those hands and they have been sent to extend to the world those very same loving hands.

Disciples preoccupied with their own stuff, will announce something different from Jesus' message about the kingdom of God and its nearness.

The same is true about the church today. If we are preoccupied with our own business, our own worries, our own plans, even our own successes, we may never get around to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. I'm not saying that we don't tend to these things, but rather that we shouldn't get preoccupied with them, or think of them as an end in themselves.

And so in this way, "It's not about us." Being a Christian, belonging to a church community, ought to remove us (as individuals or as a body) from the center of the universe.

To hope that more people will come to our church to join our fellowship is a misplaced effort, unless the ultimate hope and purpose in it all is to **bring people into a closer relationship with Jesus Christ.**

So rather than be a church that "desires to grow" simply in numbers of attendees, a church that is following after Jesus Christ will be a church that "desires to grow" deeper in relationship with him. If it's not about us, it IS about this – becoming more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

One pastor says it this way:

Jesus doesn't ask: "Pray to the Lord of the harvest to send members." The purpose of the church is not to find members or be members who have their names of the membership role of Grace Lutheran Church. Jesus didn't say, "God, send attenders."

Jesus prayed: "Lord, send.... workers." That God would send people who know how to work with their hands. That God would send people who know how to work with their hearts. (Edward Marquhart)

A church will grow when it makes its focus Jesus Christ, in fact the Holy Spirit guarantees it.

Our scripture lesson is so helpful on this. To be the church of Jesus Christ these days is not easy, but the way is clear:

Pray,
Go,
Point to Jesus.

Amen.