

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 15, 2012
Pentecost 7
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Amos 7:7-15
Psalm 85:7-13
Ephesians 1:1-14
Mark 6:7-13

The verses from our Gospel reading this morning find Jesus sending out the disciples in pairs of two as an extension of his own ministry. In reading this text, it is hard not to conclude that by doing this, Jesus is anticipating the birth of the church and its mission.

Perhaps that is why the lectionary compilers placed the reading from Ephesians 1 with today's Gospel lesson. The passage from Ephesians 1 is a lengthy prayer, where Paul gives thanks for the calling of the church. Amazingly, this lengthy passage is a *single sentence* in the Greek!

One of the themes that emerges from this prayer is that the church was not an afterthought in the mind of God. Rather, the church was God's preferred way of blessing the world and reconciling the world to Himself from the beginning. God has chosen to heal the problem of sin and the alienation it causes by claiming a people for Himself, and by pouring out the Spirit on that people so that they become the living embodiment of Jesus in the world.

When we see Jesus pairing up the disciples in our Gospel lesson and sending them out, it's hard not to look forward to see the birth of the church, and to realize that the church is called and sent forth to continue Jesus' ministry in the world.

But this seems a rather odd plan. How can a group of people so diverse and different come close to saying what Jesus said -- and doing what Jesus did -- in our day and time? After all, he was divine. We are all too human, as the apostle Paul pointed out last week. How can a group of folks who are different in so many ways ever pick up the baton and continue Jesus' work in the world?

Our Gospel lesson tells us that indeed this happened with the disciples. Mark tells us that the disciples whom Jesus commissions actually go out and successfully carry out the instructions of their Lord! This is noteworthy, because it is one of the few times in Mark's Gospel where Mark actually speaks favorably of the disciples. It is also the first (and only) time in Mark where the disciples are called *apostles* (literally, "those who are sent forth").

And our own experience tells us that the church of today *can* carry on Jesus' work in the world, because we've seen churches doing it and we've been part of churches that do it.

We know it can be done. The burning question is: HOW?

With our Gospel lessons in view, let's look at a few possible answers to that question.

1. The Church continues Jesus' ministry and work in the world in complete dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus sends his disciples out, he tells them, “don't take any extra clothes, any extra money, any extra anything. Stay at the first place that receives you. And if people won't listen, leave them to God and move on.”

Clearly, if we are going to be Jesus' followers and carry forward his ministry, we must get to the place where we are totally dependent upon the leading of the Holy Spirit. We must give up the illusion that we can do Jesus' work through our own cleverness or abilities, or through our own natural gifts.

This is why Paul could say last week that he boasted in his weaknesses, because they forced him to depend totally upon God. His weaknesses were opportunities for Paul to trust God, and for God to manifest his power through Paul's life to others.

But there is another feature to our dependence upon the Holy Spirit that is worth noting here. As Jesus prepares to send the disciples out, he tells them not to take anything with them except a walking stick and their sandals.

This week I discovered another place where these same instructions were given. In the Old Testament book of Exodus, God is preparing to deliver the children of Israel from Egypt. God instructs Moses to have the people prepare the Passover meal, to get the spotless lambs ready, to slaughter them, to sprinkle the

blood over the doors so that the angel of death will "pass over" their homes and spare them from death.

At that point in the narrative, God instructs Moses to give the people these instructions:

Wear your traveling clothes as you eat this [Passover] meal, as though prepared for a long journey. Wear your sandals, and carry your walking sticks in your hands. Eat the food quickly, for this is the Lord's Passover. On that night I will pass through the land of Egypt and kill all the firstborn sons and firstborn male animals in the land of Egypt. The blood you have smeared on your doorposts will serve as a sign. When I see the blood, I will pass over you. The plague of death will not strike you when I strike the land of Egypt. (Ex. 12:11-13)

When Jesus tells his disciples to take nothing but their walking sticks and their sandals, it seems reminiscent of God's instructions to the children of Israel as they were about to leave Egypt. The children of Israel were to be in a heightened state of "readiness," for God was about to do something decisive. They were to be dressed and ready to go, because they were about to "go," and to go quickly. There were to be no encumbrances, nothing tying them down, nothing holding them back from what God was about to do in their lives.

And as Jesus instructs his disciples here with the same words, I wonder if he is showing them that what they are about to do is as foundational and as important as was the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt?

Is Jesus telling these disciples that they are taking part in a "new" Exodus, leading people from slavery to sin and into a new reality of healing, peace, forgiveness and reconciliation?

And if that's true, then these guys not only must depend on Jesus, but they must get their lives in order and be ready to travel light, free of any hindrance or distraction that would distort their focus or impede their mission.

And if that is true of the apostles *then*, it's true of us *now*, right? If we are to carry on Jesus' work in the world, not only must we depend completely on the Holy Spirit to do so, but we must also free ourselves of distractions and encumbrances, to be willing to travel light and to act at a moment's notice when God lays it on our heart to do so.

Jesus' ministry is to continue in the world through us. We are now his hands, his feet, his voice. But we can only be his hands and feet and voice in the world as we depend on the Holy Spirit, and as we keep our lives simple and free and open to what God wants to do next.

And there is one final characteristic about how the church carries on Jesus' work that I want to mention this morning.

2. The work of Jesus continues in the world corporately and communally, not privately and individually.

In a culture which places the individual at the center of life and reality, this notion sounds foreign. But it is true. *Jesus has called the **church** to continue his ministry, not Lone Rangers or Rugged Individualists.*

I believe that one reason Jesus dispatched the disciples in pairs instead of individually was to show that ministry is something assigned to the *church*, the community of faith, the Body of Christ. Ministry is a corporate task. The Holy Spirit is not my private possession, nor yours. The Holy Spirit is Christ's gift to the church, not just individuals.

Because ministry is a communal task, it protects us from two temptations:

First, it safeguards us from the temptation to be disobedient and unfaithful. The temptation to fall away or to compromise is more readily resisted. There is a built-in accountability and strength in numbers.

A second safeguard of the corporate nature of ministry is that it strengthens us in those times when we are discouraged and tempted to give up.

We've learned in recent weeks from the Apostle Paul that following Jesus can sometimes be a daunting task. Discouragement is an ever-present possibility.

But let us remember that ministry must be thought of in terms of "us," not "I." Christ's ministry is a task given to the whole church. I'm not in this alone, and neither are all of you.

So in those times when we are discouraged, and in those times when we are weary from the work we've been given to do, let us remember that we are part of something much bigger than the little part we've been given to play. The church of Jesus Christ is rolling onward and forward. The gates of hell cannot prevail against her. The church is not going to go away.

These two insights help us as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table this morning. For as Christ feeds us here with bread and wine, we are reminded of our utter dependence upon God for all of life, including the ministry we've been given. The Eucharist shatters our illusions of self-reliance and independence, and reminds us that we are not lone rangers. We are in this together. We are the church, Christ's Body. Feeding on these elements reminds us that the work of Jesus which we carry forward in the world is done in terms of "us" and not "me."

Let us come, then, as those who have been empowered, but who are dependent. And out of such dependence comes the awareness that his grace is sufficient for our every need.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.