

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 7, 2013
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 66:10-16
Psalm 66
Galatians 6:1-10, 14-18
Luke 10:1-12, 16-20

The sending out of 72 disciples by Jesus in our Gospel lesson today is unique to Luke. Matthew and Mark speak about Jesus sending out the twelve, but only Luke speaks of 72.

Some scholars believe that Luke may be anticipating the mission to the nations (i.e., Gentiles) that will begin at Pentecost, which might also explain Jesus' command in verse 8 to "eat what is set before you."

Images of the harvest indicate a focus on the *eschaton*, or the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness. This gives the mission a tone of singlemindedness and seriousness. The disciples are to travel light and to stay focused on the task at hand.

They are to rely completely on the hospitality of others, and whether folks accept their message or reject it, the message is to be the same. The message: *The Kingdom of God is near!* There will be judgment, but people will be judged by what they have missed ("The Kingdom of God is near"). Further, that word of judgment is reserved for Jesus, not his emissaries.

These “words of woe” from Jesus seem particularly harsh on the villages of Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. We have to assume that Jesus or his disciples have ministered in these areas at a prior time. These villages have enjoyed a privilege not shared by the Gentiles (e.g., people in Tyre and Sidon), so their punishment will be greater. It reminds us of the old adage: *To whom much is given, much will be required.* Or, in the words of another scholar: “It is almost frightening to be favored by God.”

The passage closes with the disciples returning and sharing reports of success with Jesus. Strangely, the disciples’ report focuses exclusively on exorcisms, although there is no mention of this in their instructions prior to Jesus sending them out (vv. 1-12). It may be that this, along with the reference to Satan falling from heaven, is meant to show that Jesus is taking control over the forces of evil.

At any rate, Jesus warns the disciples (then and now) that their joy should not lie in certain gifts or powers, but rather that God has received and accepted them, and that their names are written in heaven.

All of this material, however, is contextual stuff. It may help us to understand certain details of the text a little more clearly, which is fine and good. But I want to turn our attention in a slightly different direction as we look at this

text again. As we do so, we may discover something very important that could easily be overlooked.

I've read this story numerous times in the past, and no doubt you have as well. I'm not sure about all of you, but for me, I often cannot help but focus on the parts of the story that are beyond my immediate experience, such as the healings, the casting out of demons, and such.

But reading the story again this week, two features really stood out for me. First, Jesus sends the disciples out in *teams*. And second, they are instructed to take nothing with them as they rely completely on the hospitality of others.

Pairing up the disciples into teams I think I can understand. They are going to announce to people that the Kingdom of God has come near. And from his first sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus described what that would look like. It involved setting prisoners free, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor in an empire that worshiped Caesar as Lord. It involved healing those who society had cast aside. It involved speaking truth to power and to those in power bent on selfishness, greed, and the oppression of others.

This kind of message will face rejection and resistance. So Jesus sends out his emissaries in pairs. When one falters, the other can help. When one is lost, the other can seek the way. When one is discouraged, the other can hold faith for both for awhile. That's what the company of believers does – they hold onto each other,

they console each other, they encourage and embolden one another, they believe for one another.

Jesus sends the disciples out in pairs, but he also commands that they take nothing with them. They are to depend on others for where they stay, what they eat, for just about everything.

I wonder how this made these men feel?

I know *for sure* how it would make me feel. It would make me *uncomfortable*. It would make me feel like I was *unprepared*. It would make me feel *unsafe*. It would make me feel *dependent*. It would make me feel incredibly *vulnerable*.

And why is that? Could it be, in part, because the culture and country I live in views *control, independence, and invulnerability* as its supreme virtues?

I have a quote on my wall that says: “If it is to be, it is up to me; if it is not to be, it is still up to me.” Where did I get that? Where did I learn that? And what does it truly mean?

If it means that I need to be proactive and intentional about taking steps toward a goal, that’s one thing. But if I look at anything I have done or accomplished in life, do I really have the audacity to say: *I did that on my own, by myself?*

If it means I must live my life with a sense of personal responsibility, fine and good. But if it means I am to be a “self-made” man, can I honestly look any of you in the eye and claim that?

The notion that we can be in full control, that we can be independent, that we can be invulnerable, is an *illusion*. I suspect that this is the very point Jesus is making here as he pairs these men up and sends them out as “lambs among wolves.” Not “wolves among lambs,” but “lambs among wolves.” That tends to make me think that the lambs really need each other.

It is interesting to me that the pilgrims and pioneers who settled this land had a keen sense of how dependent they were on one another, even for their very survival. The colonies they eventually established were, after all, called “Commonwealths,” where the good of any individual was closely linked to the good of the whole. As Benjamin Franklin said at the signing of the Declaration of Independence: “We must hang together, or assuredly we will all hang separately.”

This leads me, then, to a simple question about this Gospel story: *Which was the greater gift Jesus bestowed on these disciples: the power to heal and cast out demons, or the power to become dependent, to work together, and to rely on others?*

Out of all the gifts Jesus has given his disciples, perhaps the greatest is that of teamwork and trusting obedience. For when we are vulnerable and dependent,

when we work together, when our hope and well-being is closely linked with others, then we can truly be called the *church, the Body of Christ, the communion of saints*. Among such people the Kingdom of God draws near. And names get written in the Book of Life.

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