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Crozet United Methodist Church

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost - July 4, 2010

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

In her book *The Preaching Life* (Cowley Publications, Boston, MA, p. 23-24), Barbara Brown Taylor writes about an encounter she once had with a recent college graduate who was interested in pursuing ordination in the Episcopal church. This young man, who Taylor describes as "bright and articulate" did not want to live out his ordination within a church. He did not wish to be held accountable to his denominational body. He was not interested in serving the sacraments, and really only wanted to preach about once a month.

I posit that saying this is like saying you would like to be a fireman, just one who would like to avoid heat and hoses, yet who is interested in the occasional ride in the fire truck.

Taylor asked this young man why he thought he needed to be ordained, then, and his response says a great deal about modern Christianity. He said that he felt he needed the identity of the ordination to be the Christian he wanted to be, so he could meet someone on the bus or on the street who looked sad and speak to them, so he could be up front about what he believed, both publicly and privately, so that he could have the credentials he thought necessary to live out his faith.

In response to this, Taylor writes, “God help us if the clergy are the only Christians with ‘credentials,’ and God help those troubled people on the bus if they have to wait for an ordained person to come along before anyone speaks to them.”¹

In this morning’s text, Jesus commissions and sends seventy persons out ahead of him, to the places he would eventually go. In the previous chapter of Luke’s gospel, he had sent out the twelve. Now the numbers had increased. Seventy is one of those special biblical numbers: Genesis lists seventy nations. In Exodus 24 and Numbers 11, Moses appoints seventy elders to help him. The Greek translation of the Bible, called the Septuagint, was believed to have been translated by seventy persons in seventy days.²

It is important to note that these seventy persons were not the clergy. These were everyday people who followed Jesus, people who had learned that if one is to be a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, then one participates in his mission, a mission that includes being vessels of a message and heralds of a Kingdom that was meant to be shared, spread, communicated, discussed, and perhaps most importantly, lived in community with one another.

Do you wonder how sure of themselves the seventy must have been? Do you think they wondered what they were getting themselves into? I don’t know about you, but I am afraid I know too well how I would have reacted to this assignment, had I been one of the seventy. I mean, up to this point, I would have been fine: Jesus stands up to the devil in the wilderness? Awesome! Jesus preaches an unpopular truth in his home town? That’s cool! He casts out demons? I’m down with that. He heals the sick? Alright! He forgives sins? Come on now! Preaches to the Pharisees? Testify, Jesus! Raises the dead? I can roll with that! Now you all go to strange cities that I haven’t been to yet, live in the houses of strangers, eat their food, and preach to strangers? Rolling out! I can actually imagine myself quietly backing away from the crowd.

Yet, these disciples went. They went into the world, where Christ sent them. They went and they cast out demons and they healed the sick. They went and they discovered that, although by appearances, Jesus had sent them out with very little, they still somehow possessed great power. They went without bread, bag, money, or even a change of clothes. They went without comfort or security and yet discovered they had great power to change the world, not because of what they had, but because of **who had sent them**.

Christ is still sending his disciples into the world. Like the seventy may have been, we too may feel overwhelmed by the task. However, God still empowers God’s disciples with what we need to proclaim Christ in the world. We may feel, like the disciples felt, powerless, disarmed, and ineffective. Yet God still equips God’s people with the power we need, both as individuals and as the church, to be the presence of Christ in the world, regardless of who we are or where we find ourselves.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Cowley Publications, Boston, MA, 1993, p. 25-34.

² “The Gospel of Luke” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Abingdon Press, Nashville.

It is too easy for Christians of today to see faith and the church as a final destination, as if once we arrive at faith, once we find ourselves among the community of the baptized, our journey is over. However, Christ reminds us in this text that we are, like the seventy, only called *here* so we can be sent *out there*. The place for the church is in the world, because it is out there where there are still God's children, made in God's image, struggling and searching for the peace and healing only Christ can bring. It is too those people that Christ sends us; it was for them, just as for us, that Christ died.

Martin Luther, one of the founders of the Protestant Reformation, believed in what he called the priesthood of all believers. As Luther saw it, your baptism is our ordination, which is why, when you look at your bulletin you will see that while this church has one pastor, every baptized person is a minister. I have certain responsibilities inherent in my Christian vocation (order the life of the church, preach, baptize, preside over the Lord's table, encourage, equip, marry and bury, etc.), yet just as I have a ministry to fulfill, so do you.

I am still not certain that I could have done what these disciples do in this reading. Perhaps that is one of the reasons sent them out in pairs. Every so often, when we feel like the road is too long and the task is too rough, we need someone, who when we say, "I can't" responds, "Yes, you can."

Yet at the same time, does this text not sound an awful lot like what our youth and adults on the Impact Richmond team do every summer? We will spend a week working inside and outside of a house in a neighborhood they have never visited, in the home of people who we do not yet know, and we will testify to the inhabitants of that home, and the neighbors who walk by about the God we know and love and trust who has blessed us with life and abilities not only for ourselves, but so that we can be blessed by being a part of God blessing others. *So that we can be blessed by being a part of God blessing others*. Why do you think our summer mission team is more than six times larger today than it was the first time we went six years ago? It is because our youth have been blessed by *going*, by giving, serving, and risking, and they go out, are *sent out by Christ*, to tell their friends, "You have got to check this out! It is an awesome experience!"

Say what you will about prayer in school, but in this community, we have young people in the schools helping Christ send people into the mission field! Jesus does not send out disciples because Jesus God needs help. Jesus sends us out because we cannot know a servant God without being servants ourselves.

Barbara Brown Taylor had once finished preaching about how the laity are the best hope for the future of the church and the movement of Christ in the world when she was approached in by a woman who said to her, "I'm not sure I want to be that important." Taylor maintains that this woman, like many of us, hear the call to Christian discipleship and Christian service as a call to do more, to be more, to serve more, to give more, to ultimately add more "stuff" to an already overloaded schedule of kids, work, marriage, recreation, bills, chores, money, house, and family.³

³ Taylor, p. 24-35.

And now, you think as you hear this morning's text about Jesus sending his disciples out into the world, two by two, and you think, *Great. I already have too much to do and now, on this day when I really wanted to hear about the local boy writing the Declaration of Independence, the preacher is telling me that to be faithful, I have to move to Africa.*

Let me be clear, I am not not telling you move to Africa, but what I am saying is that Jesus can and does send his disciples short distances as well. Tomorrow (or maybe Tuesday), the God we know in Jesus Christ is going to send you to do the things you *already do*, **but** God is sending you to the places and tasks you already do as a disciple of Jesus Christ. That means that as you dress your children or yourself, or you put on your name tag or your tool belt or your scrubs and mask, as you fire up the computer or start the truck, as you greet the customer or the client, as you enter the nursing home or the clinic or the school or the university, you see yourself as someone who was sent to that place to complete those existing tasks by the Lord who has saved and blessed you with his life.

And you may say, who am I? I am a sinful person! I am an ordinary person! Yet it is through the lives and witness of ordinary persons doing ordinary things in the name of an extraordinary Savior that their story of the reign of God is told.

So our Lord tells us to *go*.

Go. Go not for yourself. Go not for the accumulation of riches. Go unafraid, even to places outside of your culture. Go unafraid, even to places outside of your religious experience. Go unafraid, even to places that do not want you. Go unafraid, even to places that will reject you. Go with urgency. Go as "sheep to wolves" but *go* and live the good news of what the God of life in Jesus Christ has done for you.

The disciples did not return crestfallen, detailing all of the rejection they experienced. Instead, they came telling stories of how, by the Spirit's power, they were much more powerful, much more able for the task at hand than they thought.

Could the same be true today? Dare we find out?

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.