

“OFFERING PEACE AND HOPE”

Luke 10:1-11 October 15th, 2017

During my early morning walks this past week, I have really felt the onset of autumn with the cooler temperatures and changing colors. Harvest time is definitely upon us in many ways as we approach Halloween and all too quickly Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Evelyn McAlister of Pendleton, South Carolina tells a story about “Dustin’s Pumpkin”: Our four-year-old grandson Dustin’s favorite pie is pumpkin. So his granddad planted pumpkin seeds in the hopes that I’d have some to make pies for Dustin. The seeds produced big beautiful vines that died one by one as they bloomed. Regretfully we told Dustin,, but we promised him that we would get pumpkins somewhere and he would still have pies.

Then one evening in late September my husband called me to come outside to see something. To my surprise, there in the tall weeds near the edge of the field behind our house was a big vine with one beautiful orange pumpkin! This was very strange because we hadn’t planted pumpkins anywhere near this field. While the others died, this lonely vine grew under the watchful eye of a loving God who wanted a little boy to have pie!

We told Dustin about the plant and that we did not know how it came up there, and with childlike faith he accepted that God did this just for him.

According to Luke, after spending some time ministering in and around Galilee, Jesus announced that he was going to Jerusalem. So he sent messengers ahead to let the townspeople along the route know that he would be passing through, because he intended to continue preaching and teaching as he traveled. But this news was not well received by the Samaritans, who reportedly refused

to welcome him into their towns and cities when he came through.

Luke then writes that as Jesus and his disciples were walking along they were joined for a short time by three men who thought they might become Jesus' followers. That was when Jesus described the qualifications for discipleship to his would-be followers. He said that if they really wanted to follow him, they had to stop clinging to their pasts and their own lives, which were holding them back, and immediately "go and proclaim the kingdom of God".

It is at this point that we come to today's text. According to Luke, the Lord commissions a larger group of followers to go out ahead of him. These disciples are to travel in pairs, and are commissioned with the task of preparing the townspeople they meet along the way for his coming. But let's not forget that in the previous chapter, Jesus had already tried sending messengers ahead to announce to one town of Samaritans along his route that he was coming, and the strategy didn't work. The townspeople did not put out their welcome mats.

Did that discourage Jesus? Did he say, "Well, folks, it seems to me that people just aren't excited about the prospect of my coming to town, I guess we should just quit trying, and get on down to Jerusalem as quickly and quietly as possible?" Did he decide to stop teaching about the kingdom of God just because he experienced a few rejections?

Of course not. In fact, when we look ahead in this Gospel, we see that he still has a long and important ministry to engage in, full of much teaching and healing, as he makes his way toward Jerusalem.

It is this attitude of HOPE, this expectation of success, that Jesus commissions his followers to maintain as he sends them out ahead of him to proclaim the kingdom of God. Even knowing there might be a disappointing turnout, even

in the face of probable rejection, Jesus never lets the possibility of being turned away deter his positive attitude about the good news God has sent him to proclaim. He never approaches his mission expecting to fail. He always goes forward with an attitude of hope and promise.

So, as he sends his disciples out ahead of him, he sends them also with an attitude of hope and hospitality, and with the full expectation that they will be successful in bringing their message of peace to those they encounter. In his words, “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

What is it, exactly, that the Lord commissions his followers to do?

What instructions does he give them as he sends them out to proclaim the good news?

Well, to begin with, he says, he sends them out “as lambs in the midst of wolves”, that is, he sends them as creatures of peace and gentleness in a world that carries the possibility of harshness, rejection, and maybe even personal endangerment. But despite that possibility, despite the evil ways of the world that they may encounter, his followers are to go to each house with peace in their hearts.

- ~ They are to be gracious in every situation, “eating and drinking what is provided” by their hosts.
- ~ They are to approach each house not in a hurry to just get in and get out, but with an attitude of hospitality and hope and the mindset that they will minister to the needs of those they encounter in whatever capacity they are called.
- ~ They are to offer words of kindness, comfort, and healing in one situation, a listening ear in another, words of encouragement to a person or family facing grief or pain.

~Most of all, they are to proclaim that “The Kingdom of God has come near to them.” They are to convey God’s message that hope and hospitality and peace is coming to them, and the door is always open.

There is a story about two missionaries who were going door to door. They knocked on the door of one woman who was not happy to see them. She told them that she did not want to hear their message and slammed the door in their faces. To her surprise, however, the door did not close and, in fact, almost magically bounced back open. She tried again, really putting her back into it and slammed the door again with the same amazing results—the door bounced back open. Convinced that one of the missionaries was sticking their foot in the door, she reared back to give it a third slam. She felt this would really teach them a lesson. But before she could act, one of them stopped her and politely said, “Ma’am, before you do that again, you really should move your cat”.

We don’t see many door-to-door sales people anymore, do we? Why not? First of all, nobody’s home any more, are they? At least, not in the daytime. And at night with so much to do, and after husband and wife have worked all day, most people don’t want to be bothered with strangers at the door. So, at least in one respect, we live in a world that is different than the one in which Jesus appointed seventy emissaries and told them to go out two-by-two into the towns and villages from house to house and heal the sick and to tell everyone who would listen that the Kingdom of God is near.

Jesus and politicians have two things in common. Both struggle to get their message out. Both send out advance men to prepare the way and to excite the people for their arrival and their messages. The seventy disciples represented the universal mission to all nations-including the Gentiles and the Samaritans.

Their discipleship had a multiplying effect because people wanted to hear the message—just like people want to hear the message today. The seventy were delegated to discover new opportunities that were there to bring the message to the people and people into the kingdom.

Why did Jesus send 70? Some scholars believe that the seventy missionaries represented the 70 nations of the world that were listed in Genesis 10.

By appointing seventy, Jesus was announcing God's intention to take the news to the entire world. They were sent in pairs because their work was difficult, even with helpers. These men were sent into a vast field with very few workers to help them. They were to pray for more laborers to join them—just like we have to pray for more helpers today when we fulfill the same mission. The seventy were successful in their first attempt at spreading the Gospel. They conquered their fears and did what they were told.

Sometimes we in the church are not willing to follow some of Christ's directions most of the time. Are they too difficult? Do we do only what is the easiest? What we fail to do most often is to not really ask something in Jesus' name and expect it to come true. We only respond in partial faith, or we try to make our desires God's desires. The task Christ gives us is not easy, but He helps us and supports us. Nothing is impossible with Christ.

The 70 disciples were totally defenseless. They were totally dependent on Christ and the reception of the people they met. We can be sure today that God is there with us. It is no secret that our world has a lot of problems such as violence, war, crime and famine. Around the world today, the collapse of civil societies sobers us. We are descending into individualisms that block our responsibilities for each other, including those who are poor. When it comes to

our ways of living, some of us may think that we can escape the consequences of our wasteful lifestyles, deliberate ignorance of other's poverty, and reluctance to combat injustice. We act as if we don't have to pay for what we've done. The only way we can escape our problem-filled world is through peace—the peace that only Christ provides. We are to proclaim that peace, which is the arrival of God's kingdom and ushered in by Jesus.

By God's grace, and because of the Holy Spirit, the consequences of our living on earth can lead towards wonderful things that don't break any law—such as helping one another and doing good deeds. We must go out into the world because there are people in great need. We must go out as caring people who identify with them in their hurt and their need. We must go out with the hope and realization that when we minister to the least and the lowest, we encounter Christ. When we feed the hungry or visit the sick or prisoners, we obey Christ. We can be so at one with Christ that Christ will live and act through us. He calls us to identify with those he came to save. The worst thing we can do is make a person who is in need or in the middle of a crisis feel rejected or inferior. Sometimes those we minister to will do more for us than we will do for them.

When Jesus said, "I am sending you like lambs among wolves", he was acknowledging the ferocity of the opposition that true followers of Christ would encounter. The image of the lamb is an image of self—sacrifice—the Pascal Lamb, who is slain to redeem His people. Any follower of Christ must also be an imitator of Christ. If we are to be like Christ, we can expect the same treatment he received. The image of the lamb is also a reminder that the kingdom of God will be marked by peace and reconciliation. We must confront the attitudes and behaviors that do not reflect God's intentions. The word "lambs"

implies that religious commitment can't be compelled by force. This sets Christianity apart from other religions, especially the radical elements of Islam.

Jesus knew the seventy would stand out and was counting on it because they had a message to share—a message so vital and life-changing that everyone needed to hear it. People still need to hear it today. When we are changed by our encounter with Christ, we have the authority and responsibility to tell everyone, by our words and by our lifestyle, that the Kingdom of God has come near to them. It defeats the powers of darkness and evil, and brings the kingdom of God among those who are lost and hurting. Jesus told the 70 to proclaim the rule and reign of God in people's hearts, and he tells us to proclaim the same message today. We do this by respecting one another, living in loving relationships, working to bring about social justice and reflecting the image of God in our works and deeds. As we pass through the various stages of our lives and the changes they bring, we are still disciples who have been sent to proclaim the Good News. God has sent us along with his presence in the form of the Holy Spirit.

A preacher was speaking at an open-air crusade in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada one time. Billy Graham was to speak the following night, but he arrived a day early. He came unannounced and sat on the grass with the crowd. In front of him sat an elderly gentleman who seemed to be listening attentively to the preaching. When the call came for people to come forward and make a commitment to the Lord, the gentleman did not move. Dr. Graham tapped the man on the shoulder and asked, "Would you like to accept Christ? I'll be glad to walk down with you if you want to." The old man looked him up and down, shook his head and said, "No, I think I'll just wait until the big gun shows up tomorrow night." In the thinking of this man and in the thinking of many people, winning souls for Christ

is something that should be reserved for the “big guns.” Today’s gospel story, however, shows us that mission is for everyone, big guns and little shots alike, the clergy as well as the laity. We are all called to be missionaries for Christ.

People of all ages still follow Jesus today. That includes taking the good news to all people all over the world, in spite of opposition from other faiths, governments that try to suppress the message, and the influence of the secular world. Those who follow Christ are the forerunners of the coming kingdom. We pray for the grace to be good representatives of what we proclaim, proficient in our witness, and to assume a personal ownership in the ultimate victory. Christ seeks us not in the temple courts of the sacred and the sanctified, but in the scandalous, secular and sinful world. When He seeks and saves us, it means our eternal destiny has been decided. Salvation rests in God’s care and keeping.

The only way to understand the Christian life is to live it. It can only be understood if we follow Christ’s example in the homeless shelter, at the local food bank, at a hospital bed, or with a friend or neighbor who has just lost a loved one. We do this as ordinary, fragile human beings. We need to give witness to God with our whole lives, especially since we don’t know when we will have the opportunity to show God’s love. Jesus calls us to go to everyone we know and touch them with the ministry of God’s love. We are called to be faithful witnesses of our Lord. All we have to do is tell people about the love of Jesus, and say that he died for all. We are not to do this alone. He has given us our church communities as support networks and we share this journey.

We are called by God and commissioned by Christ to travel in all directions from our buildings, offering hospitality and welcome-offering peace-in the name of Jesus Christ. We are called to offer HOPE to men, women, older

people, baby boomers, millennials, and children. We are called to welcome our neighbors with open arms, gathering all of God's beloved community into one beautiful and diverse body of Christ.

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. You have been called and commissioned! Therefore, go on your way!