

Sunday, July 7, 2019
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 9 (Year C)
Luke 10.1-11, 16-20
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

The season after Pentecost is all about growth, as evidenced by the color green—growth of the Church and growth of those of us who follow Jesus. Today’s Gospel reading is a pivotal story about growth, particularly growth of the Church. Of course, throughout his public ministry, Jesus has been traveling through the countryside winning hearts and minds with his message of love and his acts of healing. Growing the Jesus Movement. A little earlier in Luke’s gospel, Jesus sends out the Twelve to expand that work. But in today’s reading, that takes a definite turn, as Jesus seeks to step up his game.

As Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem, toward his impending death, the time available for him to spread his message is limited. He decides to send special messengers to extend the reach of his teaching and to prepare the ground for his arrival among those he intends to visit. He appoints seventy such messengers—apostles—to go out in pairs to prepare the people to receive him.

The number seventy is significant. Genesis 10 provides a list of all the nations of the world, numbering seventy. This number, therefore, implies all humanity. That the salvation he proclaims is for all of humanity. This is further emphasized by the fact that Jesus is traveling through Samaria, which is Gentile territory. These seventy apostles are to expand the scope of Jesus’ message beyond the Jews, to minister to Gentiles, thereby preparing all humanity for Jesus’ coming to them. Thereby expanding the scope of his mission.

In his sending of the Seventy, there is a definite sense of urgency. Jesus first tells them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Lk 10.2). There is so much work to be done, but few to do it. Just as when there are crops ready for harvest, they need to be tended to immediately before they go bad in the field. Jesus then commands them, “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road” (Lk 10.4). They are not to waste any time packing for their trip. They are not to get delayed with idle conversation with others along the way. And this sense of urgency is further indicated in Jesus’ later reference to the falling of Satan, presenting a familiar apocalyptic image of the end of the ages. There is no time to waste. They are to get right down to the business at hand.

As they hurry off on their mission, the Seventy are instructed to take nothing with them. By not taking a purse or anything else, they are not to rely on worldly, material means, but to rely solely on the gifts and talents God has given them. The Seventy are to go with only their enthusiasm for the Good News they are to proclaim. At its heart, their mission’s success will be independent of money or possessions and entirely dependent on their proclamation by word and action that the kingdom of God is near. Furthermore, they are to enter into this mission with nothing that might distract them from their purpose. The absence of even the minimal necessities for travel represents their total reliance on God for their wellbeing. Without “stuff” to worry about, they can completely focus on what is important—their mission. Traveling lightly

also means having the courage and freedom to go forth in vulnerability and intentional poverty, and to be dependent on the hospitality of others.

Relying on the hospitality of others means that they are opening themselves to be nurtured by those they encounter on their journey. It means that they are dependent on others for food and lodging. But their care and nurture extends beyond the merely physical. They will also be nurtured spiritually. Freed to focus on the message they proclaim, they can live into that message in the fullest sense, deriving spiritual sustenance, even as they themselves are providing spiritual nurture to those they minister to.

The mission of the Seventy, like that of the Twelve, is to extend the work of Jesus who proclaimed good news to the poor and ushered in the arrival of the kingdom of God. They are to do this by offering peace to those whom they encounter. They are to proclaim the message of God's love for all humanity. They are to demonstrate this love in tangible ways by caring for the poor and healing the sick. They are to share with others the news that the kingdom of God is near, and to give them a foretaste of what that means in their lives here and now.

In performing this work, the apostles have the same authority for the ministries of preaching and healing that Jesus himself has. But what they do is merely a prelude. Their single purpose is to prepare others to encounter Jesus. To provide the opening by which others might more readily recognize and accept him into their lives. And then for them to fully experience the goodness that Jesus has to offer.

As he sends them out, Jesus cautions the Seventy that things may not always go smoothly for them. Many will receive what they offer. But there will also be times when people react against their message. He uses the imagery of them being as lambs among wolves. He uses the imagery of them going among snakes and scorpions. They will be vulnerable. But this work is about being vulnerable. It is about being willing to show with one's own life who Christ is and what he has done. In being faithful to this calling, Jesus assures them that they will be protected. That they are given the power to resist these forces.

Jesus tells them that when they are rejected, not to take it personally. They are to shake the dust from their feet in response. This action conveys the same idea as the modern phrase "I wash my hands of it." Shaking the dust off the feet symbolizes that a person has done all that can be done in a situation and therefore carries no further responsibility. That being said, ultimately it is not about the apostles' success rate. It is about their putting in the best effort possible. If their message is received, great. If not, no harm no foul. They are not to become dejected at seeming failure. For the ultimate outcome is in God's hands.

At the conclusion of their mission, the Seventy return to Jesus reporting their success. Those whom they have reached, the success they have achieved, surpasses anything that they could possibly have imagined. But Jesus cautions them that their joy should not be about successful outcomes. Rather it should be a joy rooted in faith, in living a kingdom life here and now. This is not about them. It is not about what they have accomplished. Yes, all of that may be important to the building of the kingdom of God. But the truly important thing is that they have been faithful. That they have obeyed their Lord and they have lived in accordance with their faith.

That they have risked going out and sharing that faith with others. What matters more than the earthly and spiritual success of Jesus' followers is the eternal relationship with God they enjoy through him. This relationship is theirs by grace. And they are simultaneously recipients and heralds of the grace and mercy of God embodied in Christ.

The Seventy had a profound impact on the shape and scope of Jesus' ministry, laying the foundation for the development of the Church as we know it today. But this is not just a history lesson—something that happened to a group of people long ago. As with all the stories presented by the Gospel writers, this too has direct application to our own lives of faith. We don't just look back on what they accomplished. We follow in their footsteps. We look ahead to how we might carry on their legacy. As followers of Christ, we are his modern-day messengers. Following Jesus, being his messenger, means we have a powerful calling. Just as with the Seventy, Jesus commands us to go ahead of him. We are called to seek out those who may not know Christ, to prepare them for receiving his message. To prepare them to receive the love and the healing that he wants them to have. And like the Seventy, we do this work with no special provisions. We go only with ourselves. We do this work with only our own stories, our own lives, to serve as a witness to who Jesus is through the example of what he has done in our lives. But we do not do this work alone. As the apostles went out in pairs, we have the support of our fellow Christians as we engage in this work.

As uncomfortable as the thought of going out and spreading the Gospel may make us, it is the only way it will be spread. Countless studies on church growth reveal what Jesus knew 2,000 years ago. We cannot expect people to come to us. We must go to where they are. We must reach out to them and touch them in their day-to-day lives. In their hurts and their hopes. And to show them that Christ is with them in those hurts and hopes. This is what Jesus was having the Seventy do on their mission. Ordinary Christians living out their lives of faith are empowered to share the word of God and to encourage others to believe and follow. They—you—are the authorities on what it means to have Christ in your life. To be in relationship with him. It is in the vulnerability of sharing our stories of faith, of sharing our experiences of Christ's love, that transformation occurs. In this way we are transformed and others are transformed.

Jesus promises that the harvest is abundant. That there is a lot of work to do. We see this in the world around us. Just look in the newspaper. Just turn on the TV. We see hate. We see violence. We see pain. We see a world in need to God's love. Who is going to share that love with those in need of it? Who is going to show them that there is a better way? What happens if we see ourselves following in the footsteps of the Seventy who were appointed to bring the world news of God's kingdom? To bring words of love, to bring hope and healing, to a hurting world? Think of the difference that would make.

We are the Seventy. And as the original Seventy demonstrate, with God working in our lives, we cannot help but be successful in the ministry he gives us. If we are only faithful and follow his command to go forth and share the Gospel.