

Sunday, July 3, 2022
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 9 (Year C)

Luke 10.1-11, 16-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1352101585283276>

(Sermon begins at about 20:15)

“Instructions for Ministry”

Ministry is hard. Sure, sometimes things go really well. People are receptive to hearing the Gospel. Sometimes—most of the time—people are appreciative of the work that we do on their behalf. But that does not mean that it is always easy. It takes a lot of work. A lot of time and energy. A lot of resources. But, when it goes well, it is all worth the effort. We walk away from those situations with a sense of satisfaction. With a sense of having fulfilled our purpose. With a sense of having truly lived the Gospel as Jesus commands us to do. That we “nailed it.”

And then there are those times when ministry can feel like we’re beating your head against a brick wall. When things just don’t go the way we planned. When, despite our best efforts, they are not appreciated. Those are the times when it is easy to question, “why bother?” When we walk away from those situation with a sense of failure. With a sense of not doing what God called us to do. With a sense of not having lived the Gospel as Jesus commands us to do. Thankfully, those times are generally few and far between. And generally, not because of our lack of trying, because of our lack of commitment. Although, in the moment, it is easy to think that things fell apart because we were not good enough, that we are not cut out for this. But the reality is that sometimes, for whatever reason, those whom we seek to minister to just don’t want to hear what we have to say. Don’t want a part of what we have to offer.

This uncertainty about how ministry will go is nothing new. Jesus himself anticipated it as he was sending out his followers to do ministry in his name. He anticipated it because he knew firsthand. He had experienced skepticism, even rejection, at his efforts. Even the people of his hometown of Nazareth were not receptive to what he had to offer. Even though they had known him since he was a baby, watched him grow up, knew what he was made of.

What we hear in today’s Gospel reading is Jesus preparing seventy of his disciples to go out to the various places he was planning to visit. Advance teams, sent with the intent of getting the lay of the land, so Jesus would know what to expect when he got there. So he would know what the needs were, to better be able to minister to them. Or to determine whether some of those places might be resistant or even hostile toward him. Not unlike the Samaritan village referenced in last week’s Gospel. Sending the seventy out on what would have presumably been a relatively easy mission was also probably his way of helping them get their feet wet. To learn what to expect. So, in giving them their instructions, he is seeking to prepare them for any eventuality.

But even sending them out on a relatively easy mission, he opens by saying, “See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.” Not that he anticipated this to be a dangerous

mission. Even so, he is recognizing that when one engages in ministry, they are making themselves vulnerable. Putting out a message, seeking to provide help, without really being sure how that message or that help will be received. The unwritten part of the instructions being that they can't worry about that, or let that deter them from seeking to do what they have been called to do.

Jesus tells the disciples that they are to "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road." The first part of this, taking no supplies, may seem foolish to our modern ears. We would never think of setting out on any type of trip, let alone seek to engage in ministry projects, without taking everything we needed. But in Jesus' time, there was an unwritten code of hospitality. Travelers relied on the kindness of strangers to provide a meal when hungry or a place to stay for the night. Certainly not a reasonable expectation in our own day. Nonetheless, carrying nothing extra was also meant to indicate a sign of urgency. That what they needed would be provided by God, generally in the form of what was provided by those they ministered to. While we live in a different time, when we cannot rely on the hospitality of strangers, when we cannot count on what we need being provided merely by asking, we are still to approach our own ministries with that same sense of urgency.

In addition to the sense of urgency in approaching ministry, there is another message implied in Jesus' instructions, particularly when combined with that of greeting no one on the road. That of staying focused on what is truly important, on the ministry being undertaken. If the disciples take purses, bags, extra sandals or clothing, that is just additional stuff to worry about. Things to keep track of, to take care of. Items and the concern for those items getting in the way of the purpose at hand—doing ministry. The same goes for not greeting anyone on the road. An example of delaying and being distracted from the task at hand. Even in our own time, this concern for maintaining focus on the work of ministry still holds. This is what we are called to do, and we should not allow ourselves be distracted from that calling.

Jesus has a few more things to say about one's behavior and actions while "on the job" of doing ministry. Instructions about what they are to do. Engaging in fellowship, healing, and proclaiming the Gospel. And instructions about graciously receiving hospitality from others. While all that is important to keep in mind, note that Jesus only devotes a few lines of text to how the disciples are to prepare for and engage in ministry. The remainder of his instructions concern dealing with the response of those to whom one ministers. Particularly when efforts to engage in ministry—to proclaim the Gospel message or provide help of some sort—are met with suspicion or are rejected. Jesus' instructions on this matter are summed up in the statement: "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.'"

This image of wiping dust off of one's feet may seem a little odd to us. But in ancient times, such an action carried a very clear message. Wiping or shaking the dust off one's feet was a common practice for pious Jews in New Testament times. To do so was meant to be a sign of rejection. Particularly when leaving Gentile cities, pious Jews would often shake the dust from their feet as a sign of separation from and even rejection of Gentile practices. A way of demonstrating that the person is taking nothing of that town with him, not even anything as

innocuous or as worthless as dust. The equivalent of the saying sometimes used in our own time, “I wash my hands of this.” Having done everything that could be done, but to no avail, there is nothing left to do but to move on. Of course, Jesus’ instructions contains a final little barb directed at those not accepting the disciples’ message. As they are wiping the dust off their feet, they are to also say, “Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.” In other words, saying in effect, “we had a really great message for you. We were trying to share God’s love, but you obviously don’t want it. Your loss.”

While the sign of wiping dust off the disciples’ feet was meant to be a statement against those who rejected them, the action also carries an important message for the disciples themselves. Wiping the dust off their feet was a sign of how the disciple was to take rejection. That they were not to hold on to, not to obsess about, what happened or didn’t happen. That they were not to grow resentful of being rejected. That the rejection does not define them. In other words, Jesus is telling the disciples that they are not to take it personally if some do not want to hear the message they have to proclaim, if some do not want to accept the help they have to offer.

I think this is also why Jesus throws in that part, as the disciples are wiping the dust from their feet, of saying “Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.” The very act of seeking to minister to another is a sign that the kingdom of God has come near. The one seeking to minister to another has sought to provide a little glimpse of what the kingdom of God is about. And really, that’s all we can do in ministry. Try to take the wonderful gift of God’s love—that we have experienced in our own lives—and to share that love with others. If some are open to receiving that gift, great. If some are not, oh well. We can’t force it on them. Someone rejecting that gift is no reflection on our abilities to minister, on our status as beloved children of God. The only shame comes in not seeking to share God’s love in the first place.

Today’s Gospel story ends with the seventy coming back from their mission, all energized by what they have experienced. That when they followed Jesus’ instructions, they were wildly successful in their ministry efforts. As Jesus tells them, “Do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” That they are not to rejoice over the results of their ministry. Not that they shouldn’t be happy with the outcome. Rather, the important thing is not so much that they were successful or not, but they showed up and gave it their best shot. The rest is up to God.

This message applies to us, as well, in our own ministries, as individuals and as a parish. Insight into what can happen when we focus on doing the ministry as opposed to worrying about how the gift will be received. When we focus on doing what God is calling us to do as opposed to worrying about outcomes. This is the invitation Jesus extends to us, as well. First is to show up. And second is to trust in his ways, to trust in God being with us, as we engage in the ministries that we are called to. When we do that, we too can rejoice that your names are written in heaven as well.