

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20  
July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
The Rev. John Forman

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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."

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Luke's Jesus sends his followers to cities that he plans to visit later. They are supposed to heal the sick and announce the reign of God. They don't get to bring anything with them except the peace of Christ. Now, you just know that most of them are feeling anxious; thinking that they are just not quite up to the task.

They live under the brutal control of a violent foreign power and a uselessly corrupt local government. They struggle with food insecurity and economic imbalance. Robbers and assassins roam the countryside. Entire belief systems are being transformed and the people Jesus sends out have no formal training, no guidebook, no help hotline.

The truth is, they *aren't* ready. They are *sent*.

They are sent unprepared, incompetent and ambivalent. In last week's Gospel we heard Jesus rejecting James and John's violent and predictable response to the lack of hospitality that a Samaritan village showed Jesus. We heard Jesus say to two other followers that the obligation to share and embody God's reign had to take priority over every other concern or duty,

including burying the dead and saying good-bye to family. Looking to the past will not be sufficient to serve them in the situations they have ahead of them.

Even so, Jesus sends unprepared, incompetent and ambivalent people out into a changing world. He sends them without absolute clarity, without details about what to do and without back-up plans. The 70 in Luke's Gospel were, just as we are, *not ready*. They were, just as we are, sent *anyway*.

You may know what it's like to be drawn, dropped or dragged into a role, a relationship or a phase of life that you didn't feel quite ready for or capable to do. If not, you will. A friend of mine says that as she sat waiting at the hospital to take her first baby home, one of her doctors said, "When parents go home with their firstborn child, it's like a baby being taken home by two other babies."

Parenting isn't the only example. When I was in Journalism school at the University of Washington, we were only allowed to take a scant handful of classes specifically focused on the craft of journalism. The dean insisted that we were at the university to learn how to think and that our first job at a newspaper would teach us how to be journalists. What he forgot to tell me is that I wouldn't be able to sleep for the first week trying to get my bearings.

Life is like that. Some events and circumstances need a great deal of preparation and study. Learning to fly. Learning to parachute, come to that. Others can be approached with some thoughtful groundwork. Marriage. A career change or retirement. Adult baptism.

And then there are those where a little flexibility, a good dose of attention and a lot of prayer are mostly what you have and need to work with. A stroke or some other debilitating disorder. An unexpected change in a close relationship. Even something like an unforeseen financial windfall can be life changing.

Sometimes, life just takes a breath-taking turn. It just does. We find ourselves facing the unfamiliar, sometimes in familiar surroundings. God does not send spiritual seductions or damaging disruptions *to* us. God *does*, however, frequently send *us* to places where God needs us to be the hands, the heart and the loving voice where Christ intends to show up later.

Our sense of disorientation can provide the opening for God to reorient us, to renew us, for the reshaped reality that find ourselves in, trying to offer peace, especially under circumstances where there really is no turning back; no return to the way things used to be.

We suddenly or slowly become aware that God has sent us a new place or at least one no longer familiar. Whether we are ready or not, it seems we must travel empty-handed with only the companionship of other children of God beside us and only God's peace to offer. Our sisters and brothers in Christ and the peace of God give us focus and an expanded self-definition so that we can continue the road ahead whether we're well-received or not.

Oh, and one other thing.

When we walk toward those unknown places feeling anxious and unqualified like sheep among wolves, there is another presence with us. Another presence, in fact, already in the place we are headed. Jesus gave his follower's the ability to overcome demons. The joy they feel on their return comes from their discovery of this capability.

Jesus shares their joy and also gently corrects them. "Look," Jesus reminds them, "I have given you authority..." The authority, the power, is God's, not their own. The joy that Jesus shares with his followers is the joy of spreading the love and peace of God, the inner energy that comes from cooperating with God's on-going creative activity.

"The harvest is plenteous," Jesus tells his followers, "but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send laborers out into the harvest." This prayer is less about *more* laborers and more about the need for laborers with more complex abilities and perspectives. And that greater complexity comes for people who stay in relationship with God where they can find the courage to walk toward uncharted places where wolves *will* be waiting just as surely as acceptance.

This is how the followers of Christ explore and expand their sense of who they are and what it means to be God's children. We learn about the seed of God's reign planted in us and how it grew and transformed us. We begin to trust the pattern of moving into the unknown, expecting to find God.

People have found God in exciting new ventures: in parenting or grandparenting, in the pursuit of education, in service roles. And people have found God's presence in disappointing, difficult or dangerous places. In coming to terms with childlessness. In the death or slow decline of a loved one. In separation or divorce. In the early days of recovery from addiction.

If we can find the strength God offers to walk into these new situations, we may find resistance or rejection and more than a little unintentionally thoughtless commentary, all of which we need to wipe away as though it were

dust clinging to our feet. Or we may find seeds that God has planted there for us to nurture until the fruit can be harvested as nourishment for others we find in these new territories.

The harvest is not the end of the process. It is a transition into another season. God doesn't just show up at the end of time to collect what has ripened. God's creating energy, the Holy Spirit given to us by Christ has been the source from the beginning. Our role is to take those first tentative steps.

William Hutchinson Murray was a pioneering Scottish mountaineer in the 1930s. In WWII, he fought with the Highland Light Infantry against Rommel's forces in Tobruk where he was captured. He spent three years in Nazi prison camps where he acquired a mysticism and poetic sensibility that gave his writing impressive depth.

In writing about an expedition to the Himalayas, Murry described the significance of taking the first step and mysterious sense of support we can discover when we move toward those places where we sense God may have sent us. "Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation)," Murry wrote, "there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no (one) could have dreamt would have come (their) way."

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