

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 7.3.22

**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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Go on your way. See, I am sending you out **like lambs into the midst of wolves**. <sup>4</sup>Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. <sup>5</sup>Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" <sup>6</sup>And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; <sup>9</sup>cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." <sup>10</sup>But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, <sup>11</sup>"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." <sup>16</sup>"Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." <sup>17</sup>The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" <sup>18</sup>He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (350)

The labor is to be as lambs amidst wolves. That's the labor these seventy were sent out to perform. The labor is to be as lambs amidst wolves.

I've always wondered this whenever it came to this passage. What's the labor these laborers were sent out to do? It was labor so plentiful that the relatively few laborers presented a problem. It was a potential harvest so plentiful that the relatively few hands to bring it in presented a problem.

Would that there were more people to do this important work!

But what was the work, I've always wondered.

We're at the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. As we were last Sunday, so we are today, at the beginning of Jesus' journey to that gleaming city, that withstanding city. Now a millennium old, it had enemies all around, it sometimes seemed. But its worst enemies were within. National pride, abuse of power, arrogant for their belief they were favored in the eyes of God: Jerusalem! Love it or leave it, amiright?

Jesus had another mantra about it all: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!"

The thing is, it was the prophet's job to hold the king to conscience—and this is how Luke's gospel understands Jesus, as a prophet. And that's what prophets were for from the very beginning, from the year 900 B.C. or so, when they first rose in practice. Prophets arose around the same time

this people of God became like other nations, with their own king. Now that there were kings in charge, of Judea, of Israel; now that the Lord was less their king than an *actual* king was—Saul, David, Solomon, Rehoboam, et cetera—there needed also to be prophets. Someone to reign the king in, someone to call him to account, prophets made it so the nearly unlimited power of the king wasn't entirely unlimited. Everyone needs limits, even kings. Everyone needs limits, especially kings.

See, it was the prophet's job to speak truth to power, even inconvenient truth, even most unwelcome truth. And this sometimes would get a prophet killed.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!”  
Jesus was going to Jerusalem.

This is the longest portion of this gospel narrative, this journey narrative; and, though the geography Jesus would move through these ten chapters doesn't suggest his route there was direct, the theme of this does track. Jerusalem: here Jesus would be killed for not going along with the people's nationalism and belligerence, for insisting instead that they join him on the project of living gently, seeing to one another, choosing love instead of power, preferring peace over pride. Don't fight. Just live.

Stop fighting. Simply live.

And now he was heading there, if slowly, if a meandering way, equal parts determined and spontaneous. It wouldn't end well there for him, he knew.

On the way, he would send people out ahead of him to prepare a place for what was coming to them. They would go ahead, in pairs to see whether he would be received or not, whether he would be given place or not.

And if not, they shouldn't overreact, these apostles, these pairs of people whom Jesus sent ahead. They shouldn't overreact, like when they were just earlier going through Samaria and no one there would receive him. Then, two of the disciples, James and John, asked if Jesus wanted them to command fire to come down from heaven to consume them. Is that what Jesus would wish for those who don't welcome him?

And it's worth wondering whether these two asked this assuming that Jesus *would* want this, or hoping he *wouldn't*. Either way, he didn't, he didn't want punishing fire invoked on this village. Instead, he rebuked them as much. Then he moved on to the next village.

Jesus goes into a little more detail here, maybe remembering that last rejection and the assumption among the apostles of how they should respond. Here he says that if any town doesn't

welcome them, simply kick the dust of that village off your shoes and move on. There's no need for vengeance. There's no need for getting even.

I'm reminded of a meme, a kitschy picture of Jesus knocking on a wooden door. "Let me in," he says according to the voice balloon, and a voice from the other side of the door says, "Why?"

"So, I can save you," says Jesus.

"From what?" says the voice from the other side of the door.

"From what I'm going to do to you if you don't let me in."

Yeah, this isn't that.

But there is a word of warning for the towns that *do* reject Jesus—and it's a stern one. In the verses excluded from today's reading we hear Jesus speaking of doom for the towns that reject the likes of what he represents, and indeed what he makes present: love, love in action, healing, restorative love in action. There's a word of warning because if you reject love, then things can become painful. If you reject love, you've rejected the things that makes life good.

See, Jesus isn't asking the apostles to press upon people religion. He isn't peddling some new ideology, and this isn't an agenda being set by some people to impose upon others, to get people to join something whose benefit is more for the imposer than for the imposed.

And it's so hard to dislodge that hearing. It's so hard to scrape away the two millennia of Christianity being an established religion, and the now half a millennium of Christianity being a religion in competition with other religions in a marketplace of ideas. It's so hard to unhear the notion that Christianity is one of our religious choices, which then invites all sorts of cynicism and coercion and corruption into the otherwise practice of love, freely offered to be freely received or freely rejected.

In fact, there's a serious argument among faithful theologians as to whether Christianity is rightly a religion at all, or if it's more an un-religion, an undoing of religion for its doing away with set cultic practices or (more recently) a set of ideas, and instead insisting upon a mode or a way, as it's so often described in the gospels—a way. A way of being, a way of walking in the world: this isn't a set of posited notions to which you convert by way of consenting to those posited notions; this is a way of being to which you convert by becoming more and more Christ-like in your living, which takes time, which can take a lifetime.

It takes practice.

Indeed, *that's* the practice.

And you would do this not for winning some prize, a means to an end. You would do this because it makes life better—for you, for others, for all, to live by love. You do this not to “get into heaven.” You do this to get heaven into the world.

This is why that word of warning. In the verses excluded from today’s reading, this is why that a word warning doom on villages that reject the presence of Jesus, which is the presence of the reign of God—for what doom does befall such bereft places, such belligerent people, doesn’t come as punishment and doesn’t come from God. There’s something more of natural consequence about this.

How we live determines how we will live.

Whether we organize households and societies around love as a first principal will determine whether things of love will abound. Conversely, where households and societies are gathered by first principles other than love, then things other than love might abound. You can make societies where competition is the dynamic and its people become either winners or losers. You can make societies gathered by brute force and myth-making, where the dynamic is all about avoiding humiliation; its people find themselves either glorified or shamed, and these always end in violence, homicidal violence and eventually suicidal violence. You can make societies determined at birth, where the few who have good fortune must be so deserving while the most who live lowly lives must be likewise deserving, freeing anyone from having to care much about that. If you’ve got the goods, enjoy them. If you haven’t got them, sucks to be you.

Love as a first principle, love for all life, gracious beautifying love: it makes everything better. Admittedly, it also makes everything harder for it compels us to act, as we recognize we are indeed our brothers’ keepers, our sisters’ keepers. At the same time, at the same very moment, it also makes everything so much less hard, so much more gracious and enjoyable and delightful and sweet. What care you offer another you can know will come to you as well for that moment when you need it.

For there will come a moment when you need it. Rest assured of this. No one gets out of here alive. And usually, the path to that is a path of decline, even of suffering. We will all at some point need what the church is meant to be in the world.

The households, villages, towns that let such love in as the organizing principle will simply be better places to live—more humane, more interpersonal, more akin to the kingdom of heaven as far as Jesus suggests it to be. (“The kingdom of heaven is as when...”)

The households, villages, towns that refuse to let such love in: it could well come to pass that they're consumed by their own spite. The world can be quite harsh. Love is a matter of deciding for it. Mercy is a matter of deciding for it. Peace is a matter of deciding for it.

And it's no easy decision, not entirely. There's a risk here, a real risk.

"Take no purse, no bag, no sandals," which is to say, make it so you can't provide for yourself, you'll need whatever is offered to you.

"Upon being received into a household, remain there; don't move from one to the next, but eat and drink whatever is set before you," which is to say accept others as they are and receive from them what they have to offer, what they have decided upon as good. It might not be what you think is good.

When I was a kid and my family took a trip to the desert southwest a roadside diner had me ordering the pancakes. I poured molasses on them unwittingly. New Englander that I am, I shall never forget that first bite of what was decidedly not maple syrup. I have yet fully to forgive them.

More seriously, on a mission trip once, I was the adult among teenagers all to stay in homes deep in Appalachia where we were doing repair work. It was right at the edge of what I could accept. It's difficult. Hospitality is difficult when on the receiving end of it, so much more difficult than when playing the host.

One homeowner brought preserves up from her pantry in a house of little more than tarpaper. A fuzzy something on the top of the preserves had my co-leader on alert for botulism. She'd grown up closer to this situation than I had. We turned down the offer of jam. We all delighted in the crackers, which were so good on their own.

It's not for nothing the story to follow this sending out is the so-called parable of the Good Samaritan. You know it well. You know it *too* well. A man went out, defenseless, and he all too soon found himself beaten, left for dead, and in need of care from someone else, anyone else. Two people came along and looked away from the needful man. But then came a Samaritan, which is to say someone whom the needful man had little reason to trust, had every reason to distrust, every reason to reject. And yet so great was his need that what choice did he have?

The Samaritan served him humbly and totally.

And the story has Jesus saying, by way of conclusion, "Go and do likewise," and we always hear it as if we're to go and do as the Samaritan did—to go out prepared to show such unflinching care, to go out empowered to show such unflinching care.

And there is that. It would be good if we were to do that.

But if you read the story again, you see it's quite more likely that what we're to do likewise is that of the man who set out and who all too soon found himself in need of care from someone else, anyone else.

We're to go out into the world undefended.

We're to go out into the world ready only to receive, prepared only be open.

We're to go out as lambs into the midst wolves. That's the work. That's the work of the gospel. Unarmed, undefended, inspiring not of escalating hostilities, inspiring only of peace. Peace.

This set of instructions, this *detailed* set of instructions, as detailed as Jesus is remembered ever to have gotten: I'd always read this as the *how* of what the apostles were supposed to do, while continuing to wonder the *what*, what it was they were to do, and why. I'd even say to myself upon reading this, "So now I know how the apostles were to do this, but I still don't know what they were to do, and I don't know why."

But the how is the what, and the what is the why. Go out as lambs though in the midst of wolves, and maybe you'll find more lambs, and maybe you'll make some lambs, as if wolves could be changed to lambs. Go out with peace all within and about you, and watch as your peace is met with others' peace. Make it so, if anything were to escalate, it would be grace. Present yourself in such a way that it's clear from the first moment of an encounter there is nothing fear, there is only everything to hope for.

Do that—for that's the work. And the laborers are indeed few, fewer now than ever, it might even seem. But so, what? It doesn't matter, not to me at least. I'm gonna do this as best I can, and I hope you'll do it too, because it will make the world better.

Thanks be to God.