

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday July 7, 2019 Proper 9C
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: Luke 10: 1-28 Sending out of the 70
Theme: Has Jesus Sent You?

Ok, Jesus says, "You've learned enough about the Kingdom of God to put it into practice. It's time that you started your summer internships." So, Jesus gathers 70 of his disciples together, pairs them up and sends them out on assignment ahead of him.

What is the point of this sending? Somehow by their love, their life, their words, their joy, their being with others they are to prepare the hearts of them to accept what Jesus is offering. What they are called to do is a really not that remarkable. They are simply asked to go among people that they do not yet know and live a believable life, a real life, an attractive life that people find curious or intriguing. When people see others living a believable life, a life that is not an act or an attempt to impress or deceive they become receptive and curious and begin to ask larger questions about how one lives, why does life matter, what am I hear from. These are the questions of meaning and significance that Jesus wants his disciples to have with those they encounter.

Jesus was intentional in sending this group out in pairs. Luke is very clear, that the "Gospel of Love," embodied by Jesus, cannot be communicated by one person. In the end, love is something that happens between two or more people. The message of the Gospel is relationally dynamic. Jesus of course knew this as well. He knew that sending out one person tended to make the gospel a merely verbal message and that was not the point.

The truth of the gospel is seen in how we relate to one another. The Gospel cannot happen just in your head. The Gospel happens between people. And the old axiom holds true: You rarely think your way into a new way of living, but you can "live" your way into a new way of thinking.

One commentator made this profound statement, about Jesus insistence on interpersonal ministry. "Unless you are in right relationship with at least one other person on this earth, unless there is someplace you can give and receive love, I don't think you have any reason to think you're saved."

Jesus' approach to ministry with his disciples brings something powerful into focus. Salvation in this passage is not something bland and antiseptic, unreal or boring as the church has made it out to be, a kind of commodity you can obtain by simply saying the correct prayer, believing the right things, reading the Bible or even going to church. All of these things may be helpful but the most important thing to realize is that the gospel happens between people. Is there one place in your life where you are giving and receiving love? Your answer to this question has more to do with "salvation" than many other things religious people tend to talk about. If there is one place that you are learning how to be self-giving in love then there is hope for salvation because you can learn to practice that with others, even those who you thought were your enemies and with others as well. The gospel intends to transform the way we relate to our world and those in it and its work within us is never done.

Jesus sent the 70 out in pairs so that they might become open to the Spirit at work within them. It was a risky proposition, one that placed each of them outside of their comfort zone where they began to depend upon the Spirit's leading, accept hospitality wherever it was offered and learn from the inner guidance and reflection that comes from attempting to be the hands and feet of Jesus or at least messengers in his name. Jesus sent them out just as he sends us out into the world, to be living manifestations of God's love.

Love is essential to the powerful work of the Spirit. We talk of being "in love" in our culture and we need to remember that it is close to what the Apostle Paul speaks of when he says we are "In Christ." If we are in Christ, we express the love of God for those around us, those placed in our lives or who cross our paths. Love is, to be sure, a gift from God. When we as people first become open to the work of the Spirit in our lives, open to the love of God, it becomes hard to have uncharitable thoughts about other people or to hold on to hatred in our hearts. Love and hatred have nothing in common save for intensity. Once love takes you over, you simply cannot be part of tearing other people down or desiring their harm. Now of course this doesn't mean that we are not tempted or that we don't fall back into destructive patterns of impatience, dislike, gossip or jealousy but with the mystery of love at work in us we will find that we no longer desire to nurture those thoughts or build on these ways of being. With love in our hearts, with the Spirit at work within us we find it hard to see another human being torn down or damaged. When we see or hear of love being violated or justice denied it moves us in a deep way, we feel it in our guts. Simply put when love takes over our lives, this is no room for hatred. We become sent ones whose primary purpose is to demonstrate the love of God between people. And this is precisely what Jesus was doing in sending the disciples

out in twos. The gospel doesn't happen in our minds, it happens between people, it happens when sacrificial love becomes evident in the community of faith or your family or work-life or neighborhood.

Jesus said that "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." There are literally millions of people who need to know the love of God, while the way of sacrificial love is a path that is not easy to take. This path that is the "road less travelled" is the one that actually leads to the greatest reward, intimacy with God and with others. It leads toward a life that has meaning because it literally is about saving not only yourself but others.

Jesus' words are challenging in this passage. He sends the 70 "out like lambs into the midst of wolves." He knows that the mission he is sending them out on is difficult and it will not be easily received. The way of sacrificial love will never have popular appeal, but it is nonetheless the way that leads to life and love and salvation.

Listen to this story of a southern boy being sent that helps us to understand what Jesus is telling his disciples and us:

At ten, William was minding his own business in Miss McDaniel's sixth grade class, dutifully copying words off the black board, when he got the call: "Mr. Harrelson says he wants to see you. Go to his office." Mr. Harrelson was our intimidating, ancient Principal.

Shaking with trepidation, I trudged toward the Principal's office. Passing an open door, a classmate would look out at me with pity, saying a prayer of thanksgiving that it was I summoned by the Principal, and not he. Ascending the gallows, I went over in my mind all of the possible misunderstandings that could have led to this portentous summons. (I was only a distant witness to the rock through the gym window incident, in no way a perpetrator or even a passive conspirator.)

"Listen clearly, I do not intend to repeat myself: You, go down Tindal two blocks and turn left, go two more blocks, number fifteen. I need a message delivered. You tell Jimmy Spain's mother if he's not in school by this afternoon I'm reporting her to the police for truancy." Oh no. God help me. Jimmy Spain, the toughest thug in the school, a sixth grader who should have been in the eighth. And what's "truancy"? Pondering these somber thoughts in my heart, I journeyed down Tindal, bidding farewell to the safety of the schoolyard, turned left, and walked two more blocks, marveling that the world actually went on

about its business while we were doing time in school. The last two blocks were the toughest, descending into a not at all nice part of town, terra incognita to me, what was left of a sad neighborhood hidden behind the school. Number 15 was a small house with peeling paint and a disordered yard – just the sort of house you’d expect Jimmy Spain to dwell in – rough-looking, small but sinister.

I stepped up on the rotten porch and knocked on the soiled screen door. My heart sank when it was opened by none other than Jimmy Spain, whose eyes enlarged with surprise when he saw me. Before Jimmy could say anything, the door was pulled open more widely and a woman in a faded blue, terrycloth bathrobe looked down at me, over Jimmy’s shoulder.

“What do you want?” she asked in a cold, threatening tone.

“Er, I’m from the school. The Principal sent me, to . . .”

“The Principal! What does that old man want?”

“Er, he sent me to say that we, uh, that is, that everybody at school misses Jimmy and wishes he were there today.”

“What?” she sneered, pulling Jimmy toward her just a bit.

“It’s like a special day today and everyone wants Jimmy there. I think that’s what he said.”

Jimmy, the feared thug who could beat up any kid at Donaldson Elementary anytime he wanted, indeed had on multiple occasions, peered out at me in wonderment. Suddenly this tough hood, feared by all, looked small, clutched by his mother’s protective arm. His eyes were pleading, embarrassed, hanging on my every stammering word.

“Well you tell that old man it’s none of his business what I do with James. James, do you want to go to that old school today or not?”

Jimmy looked at me and wordlessly nodded. “Well, go get your stuff. And take that dollar off the dresser to buy lunch. I ain’t got nothing here.”

In a flash he was away and back. His mother stood at the door, and after making the unimaginable gesture of giving Jimmy a peck on the cheek, stood

staring at us as we walked off the porch, down the walk, and back toward Tindal Avenue. As we walked back toward the school, we said not a word to one another. I had previously lacked the courage to speak to Jimmy the Hood, and Jimmy had never had any reason, thank the Lord, to speak to me. Walking back to school that morning was certainly not the time to begin. We walked up the steps to the school, took a right and wordlessly turned toward the Principal's office. I led him in, handed him off to the Principal's secretary who received my ward. For the first time he seemed not mean and threatening but very small. As the secretary led him toward the Principal's office, Jimmy turned and looked at me with a look of, I don't know, maybe regret, maybe embarrassment, but it could have also been gratitude.

That evening, when I narrated my day to my mother at supper, she said, "That is the most outrageous thing I've ever heard! Sending a young child out in the middle of the day to fetch a truant student. Mr. Harrelson ought to have his head examined. Don't you ever allow anyone to put you in that position again. Sending a child!"

But I knew that my mother was wrong. That day was the best day of my whole time at Donaldson Elementary, and preparation for the rest of my life. It was my first experience of a God who thinks nothing of commandeering ordinary folk and giving them outrageous assignments.

And just as Jesus sent out the 70 to prepare the way for the kingdom long ago, he continues to send us into the world. The simple and profound truth is that the kingdom of God is entrusted to ordinary people like us. Just as Jesus gave his "flesh" for the life of the world, we are asked to have skin in the game, to be part of the only experience that will begin to make the words of the gospel believable to others. We are asked to try to give ourselves to one another and to the people that the Spirit places in our path.

The gospel is something that happens between people and Jesus' instructions to his sent ones are interpersonal. They are designed to put people in touch with one another. Person-to-person is the way the gospel is best communicated. Think about it: who helped to communicate the gospel to you. There is little doubt that it was a person loving you, a person forgiving you, a person respecting you, a person listening to you, a person crying with you, a person understanding you, a person encouraging you.

Every follower of Jesus is a sent one. Despite what our culture might say, your life is not your own if you are in Christ. Your life belongs to God, you have been summoned to be the love of God in the world right where you are and there are few things more exciting than having Jesus propel you out of yourself and into the world in love.

Note: I want to acknowledge my debt to William Willamon for the story of William at Donaldson Elementary. Also, I am indebted to Richard Rohr for his thoughtful commentary on the sending of the 70 (or 72), especially for his idea of living a believable life which is something I will be developing in my own personal theology for some time I'm sure.