

Luke 10:1-11, 17-20

GOD'S KINGDOM IS NEAR

My first Sunday in my first pastorate was going to be a memorable day. Besides preaching my first sermon, it was a quarterly Communion Sunday and the Bicentennial celebration of our country. I was energized so I worked hard on my sermon. At the same time, I was determined to get into better physical shape. Thus, every day in the late afternoon, I would ride my 10-speed bike five miles uphill to the Presbyterian Children's Home; I would swim for a half-hour, and then I would ride back home.

As the weekend approached, like most communities throughout America, our town had lots of special events taking place; there was a talent show, beauty contest, different bands played, lots of food to sample, crafts and other displays, and, of course, fireworks. On Saturday afternoon, when there was a lull between activities, I was going over my sermon and preparing for worship. I felt somewhat chilled so I put on a sweatshirt. Then, I added a lightweight jacket. The chill persisted and I began to feel a bit shaky and feverish. Finally, Monica and one of the elders took me to the hospital.

I had a temperature of 103 and was diagnosed with exhaustion, and I was ordered to bed! The director of the Presbyterian Children's Home, who was a Presbyterian minister, was able to preach in my place the next morning. I didn't get out of bed until Thursday of the following week. The Session had decided to postpone communion until the following Sunday when I would be present. As I entered the sanctuary for the first time – a week later than expected – I remember feeling extremely humbled and grateful to be there. By the grace of God, my church members were very understanding. In time, we shared a good laugh about my less-than-ideal beginning as their new pastor. I like to keep that remembrance before me as a way of reminding me that it is God's grace that has sustained me through the years and has sent me forth to serve in Jesus' name.

The biblical narrative reminds us that our Lord sends disciples ahead of him to prepare the way. In Luke 9, we read that Jesus appointed the Twelve and sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. In today's lesson, Jesus appointed seventy others and sent them in pairs to do the same work that Jesus would do when he arrived after them. And on and on it goes; down through the centuries, Jesus sent forth his disciples to announce – in word and in deed – that God's kingdom is near and that Satan's rule is coming to an end. God delights in taking ordinary people and infusing them with power from on high so that they (and we!) can do extraordinary things.

What was true then is still the case today. The demands of discipleship are extremely high. We are sent out like lambs into the midst of wolves; we are to travel lightly and not allow a lot of things to get in the way - what is needed is concentration of the essentials, not the unnecessary accessories; we are sent out to share God's peace with others; stay put and eat what is provided; we might experience rejection; we are to do our part to bring healing to others; and, we are to announce that God's kingdom is near.

The demands of discipleship are great indeed. However, the rewards of being a disciple of Jesus Christ are even greater! Others will welcome us and peace will be shared. Joy will be ours as we experience God's power at work, as we see human lives transformed, and as we taste the fruit of our labors for the Lord. Jesus' words, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning," may mean that Jesus knew that a deathblow to Satan and all evils had been struck

and that God's will would win out. Or it may be that Jesus was giving the disciples a warning against pride – after all, it was pride that was Satan's downfall and the reason why he was cast out of heaven. What is most important is to focus not on what we have done for the Lord but what God has done for us and through us in reaching out to others. When we keep our priorities straight, we will reap tremendous rewards.

We are here this morning because we feel that Christ has called us to himself. Christ has done things for us we could not do for ourselves, namely he has saved us from sin and death and made us part of God's reign, now and forever. When a person is in Christ, she or he receives gifts from Christ. Then, with gratitude and the help of the Holy Spirit, we go forth to share what we have been given so that others will experience God's peace, joy, presence, purpose, and rejoice with us.

I have to tell you, I saw God's kingdom come closer this past month when our nephew, James, all on his own, gave one of his healthy kidneys to our daughter, Laura, so that she could have a new and healthier lease on life. His sacrificial offering reminds me of Jesus' own words and actions: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Furthermore, God's kingdom came nearer when our Mission Trip team proclaimed the kingdom of God, in word and with actions, to the people of Brunswick and New Hanover counties in North Carolina. I have heard some stories, and I hope we will hear a lot more, of how Christ's love was extended to the needy, and how, in turn, our own people were blessed and rewarded with great joy.

Jesus delights in taking and enlisting ordinary people to work with him in his salvation of the world. He sends us out to participate in the same things that he does in the world. Jesus heals and teaches, preaches and saves, but he never does this by himself. Right from the start, and down to the present day, Jesus co-missions; i.e., he doesn't work alone. He depends on us to cooperate with him and one another in doing mission and seeing to it that the reign of God is coming near to the world. This is the way that God gets done what God wants done!

Dr. Will Willimon tells the following story: I was visiting a member of our congregation who was dying of AIDS. When I got to his home, I rang the doorbell a couple of times and, when I got no response, I assumed that perhaps he was resting. As I turned to leave, the door opened and standing there was one of my church members, an older woman who was a long-time member of the congregation. "Come on in, Pastor," she said. "I heard the doorbell but I was bathing Tommy and I couldn't get to the door in time. Sorry. Come on in. I'll be finished with his bath in just a few minutes and you can talk with him. I'm sure he would appreciate your visit." Wow, there she was, an older woman, not related to Tommy in any way other than they were both members of the body of Christ, bathing him! I wanted to take off my shoes, for I was standing on holy ground. That day the reign of God came very near to me.

That's Jesus for you – using one person to reach out to another with infinite love and compassion. Our Lord continues to call ordinary people to do some extraordinary things in his name. And when they obey, when they go where he sends them, the kingdom of God draws nearer and nearer.

This should come as no surprise to us. After all, it's the Sabbath and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is prepared for us. Our crucified-yet-risen Lord is the Host at his table and, once again, he has taken ordinary elements of bread and wine and consecrated them to become something quite extraordinary – powerful and visible symbols of his broken body, shed blood,

and sacrificial death for us all. As we join with our Lord and one another, be assured that God's kingdom is very near, and rejoice for your names are indeed written in heaven. Amen.

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