

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

7th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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July 23, 2017

Text: Luke 10:1-11; 16-20

Title: “The Outsiders: The Travelers”

I confess: I’ve avoided them. Maybe you have, too. They come in pairs. Dressed similarly. If they are men they are dressed in white shirts with ties. Black pants. Women in skirts and white blouses. Once when I was working outside on some landscaping, two of them approached me. I didn’t have time to escape. They were young guys under 25 as most of them are. Required by their church. Single men serve for 2 years. Single women 18 months. Their first approach was to ask if there was anything they could do to help. I was spreading mulch. They were kind-hearted and gentle in their approach these two. I said no thank you and asked them how their day was going. We chit-chatted for a few minutes until they began moving into the religious questions. Because I struggle with this kind of cold-call evangelism I wasn’t very open with them but thanked them for coming. When it became apparent they weren’t going to get anywhere with me, they handed me the usual brochure, wished me a good day, and left.

I’ve thought a lot about the Mormons since that encounter, and I have to say that I’ve come to respect them for their willingness to risk in order to share their message. Here were two young men who do not get paid for this work. They have to earn their own keep. There is no worldly reward for doing what they do. They risk ridicule which I’m sure they receive from time to time. They risk rejection. They risk hostility. They risk a lot. Yet, they go, and I’ve not met a one who hasn’t been gentle and respectful. And their model for doing this kind of traveling evangelism—which simply means telling the good news of God’s love expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—comes from the Gospel According to Luke in which Jesus sends disciples out into the world two by two. Here’s the only version in the Bible of this mission expansion of Jesus:

10 After this the Lord appointed seventy^[a] others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ² 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. ³ Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴ Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵ Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ ⁶ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷ 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.⁸ Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you;⁹ cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’^[b]¹⁰ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say,¹¹ ‘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.’^[c]

¹⁷ The seventy^[d] returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!”¹⁸ He said to them, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (Luke 10:1-20(NRSV))

I wonder what would happen to us if we required what the Mormons require as a condition of membership: serve the church by going out two by two as Jesus sent the 70 out into the world as travelers, as outsiders. Rather than coming to this building to be served, what if we took this passage literally as our call to go out two by two? What if we became travelers for Jesus?

R. Alan Culpepper, in his reflections on this passage in the New Interpreter’s Bible says that this commissioning of the 70 by Jesus contains 10 principles that guide the mission of the church and each generation that makes up the church.

1. First “It affirms the worlds need for the church’s mission: “the harvest is plentiful.” There is more work to do than laborers to do it.

The Nominating Committee knows what this means first hand. There has not yet been a year when all the ministry tasks have a willing person or persons to fulfill the tasks as a genuine call of God. Occasionally, the committee just can’t find a willing person, so there sometimes are opportunities listed in the bulletin for ministry to be carried out, ministry that would make a difference in the lives of the people for whom we are seeking to care, but most often those opportunities are left unfilled. The harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few.

The plentiful harvest is not just evident in the work of the church, but in the past decade or so a groundswell in the number of people claiming to be spiritual but not religious has been profound. They even have their own acronym: SBNR, they are called. *In a 2012 survey by the Pew Religion and Public Life Project, nearly a fifth of those polled said that they were not religiously affiliated — and nearly 37 percent of that group said they were “spiritual” but not “religious.” It was 7 percent of all Americans, a bigger group than atheists, and way bigger than Jews, Muslims or Episcopalians.* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/us/examining-the-growth-of-the-spiritual-but-not-religious.html>)

People are searching for deeper meaning in life, looking for bread that satisfies, but a high percentage aren’t participating in the church. The harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few.

2. “Second, Jesus’ commission affirms the importance of prayer in support of the church’s mission: “Ask the lord of the harvest.” Check out this video clip of a couple who experience prayer as a way to reach people:

Video: <https://www.facebook.com/MPCCwired/videos/10154716197783437/>

3. “Third, it insists on the active participation of each disciple: ‘Go on your way.’. The work of the church is not merely the calling of a select few. Believers can contribute to it in their own way in the context of their own spiritual journey.”

In 1986 the General Conference of the UMC made a significant change in the Discipline of our denomination. We changed the language when we speak of ministry. The old way was to speak of ministers as if we meant only ordained persons. But as the church wrestled with the meaning of ministry, we came to the conclusion that ministry was never intended to be exclusively given to the ordained, but that each person who seeks to follow the ways of the Christ is in every way called to be in ministry. So the Discipline was changed. Now there is a section entitled: “The Ministry of All Christians.” Part of it reads: “The heart of Christian ministry is Christ’s ministry of outreaching love. ... All Christians are called through their baptism to this ministry of servanthood in the world to the glory of God and for human fulfillment. The forms of this ministry are diverse in locale, in interest, and in denominational accent, yet always catholic in spirit and outreach.” (P.125)

4. “Fourth, Jesus’ commission warns of the dangers believers will face and provides guidelines: “I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.”

I’m reminded of the story of a young boy whose mother was tucking him in bed for the night. A violent storm was rumbling outdoors, shaking windowpanes and brushing tree branches against the house. She was leaving the room and just about ready to turn off the light when the little boy said with a tremor in his voice: “Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?” She turned and smiled. Went back to the bed and with a reassuring hug said, “I can’t, dear,” she said, “I have to sleep with your Daddy.” There was a long silence, and as she got up to leave for the second time she heard his small shaky voice: “The big sissy.”

Following the Christ is not for the faint of heart, which is why – I am convinced – Jesus sent them out in twos.

6. Sixth, the commission specifies the purpose of the mission: “Say, ‘Peace to this house’ and ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” Disciples declare what God is doing and bring God’s peace to whoever receives them.

At the recommendation of Wayne Muller who’s book: Sabbath, Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest, I’ve been trying something I’ve never intentionally practiced before. Muller says it’s his conviction that God created everything in goodness, that each creature God has called good as God created. Therefore, life is blessed by God. Sometimes we forget that in the whirl of our preoccupied, task-oriented lives. In order to recognize the goodness present in people, Muller suggests blessing our children, our family members, our friends by placing a hand on their heads and offer a prayer for their well-being, their happiness, their healing. He also invites people to quietly and secretly bless strangers: “May you be happy. May you be at peace.”

I've done some experimenting with this practice and have found it fascinating that my inner experience with people is very different when I remember to think in terms of blessing someone. Instead of being preoccupied with my own stuff, I find myself in the presence of God even when the situation might be awkward or uncomfortable. An inner dialogue happens as the blessing reminds me that no matter what is going on, this person before me is loved by God, that God is present in that moment. The kingdom of God is near whether the person and I recognized it or not.

7. Seventh, the host--not the guest--sets the context for the disciple's witness: "Eat what is set before you." The disciples do not seek to dictate the menu or impose their own cultural background on others. Even food they aren't supposed to be eating due to their dietary laws, Jesus instructs them to eat.

8. Eighth, Jesus' commission recognizes that the disciples will not always succeed: "[When] they do not welcome you..." Jesus knew that the disciples would meet resistance and rejection by some. A helpful reminder to those who think we need to please everyone in the work that we do in the church. It simply is not possible.

9. Ninth, Jesus admonished the disciples to persevere: Shake their dust from your feet. Don't stop your work because some reject you. Rather, keep moving and doing the good God has called you to do.

10. "Tenth, and finally, Jesus gives the disciples a word of assurance about the fulfillment of God's redemptive mission: "Know this: the kingdom of God has come near."

By virtue of our baptism, every person is called to ministry. So we leave this place each week and go out to our place in the world doing the best we can to live out that call. Some may not be ready nor prepared to preach or heal. Jesus didn't send newcomers, after all. He sent people who'd been with him a while. Yet, even newcomers can utter a secret blessing for a stranger. Though it may not change the stranger, it just may change us.

It's also clear that the traveler is always an outsider, visiting new places and adjusting to customs and cultures outside their own experience. Jesus warns the disciples that not everyone will welcome them on their journey. We too, may suffer rejection on our journey as Jesus' followers. Here Jesus wants us to make the most of the places we are welcomed and not worry so much about the places that turn us away. It is the places of welcome where an outsider becomes an insider. Embrace them, find them and create them for others, but above all be open to the ways in which Christ calls you and sends you. It may begin with prayer for someone like the couple in the store, but that prayer may transform into a call to pray with that person. Whatever you sense Christ calling you to do, there comes a time when risk is involved, when you and I are called out of our comfort zones, and take the risk of becoming a traveler for Jesus as we take steps to go where we haven't gone before. Will you take the risk?