

We're On a Mission

Luke 10:1-11

Browns Point UMC, July 25, 2010

Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

Let us pray: Gracious God, you have called us here to worship, to be encouraged, and to be challenged to live as your disciples. Help us now to hear from you the work that you would have us do, so that we might share your unending love with the world. Amen.

I don't know if you're one of those people that looks forward to long plane trips or dreads them. I go back and forth. I'm generally a pretty friendly person, I think, and I genuinely enjoy meeting new people, but I'm also a natural introvert, who would like to work or read or nap at *some* point during a cross-country adventure. And then, of course, there's always the danger (or gift, depending on how you look at it), that my seat-mate will ask me what I do for a living. I'll say, "I'm a United Methodist Pastor." And depending on the other person's church background and attitude toward mainline churches, he or she will either a.) tell me how his brother's girlfriend used to go to a church and he went one time and it was pretty cool; b.) explain how she grew up in the church and got out of the habit but really intends to go back; c.) ask, "Doesn't the Bible say women aren't allowed to be pastors?" or d.) tell me all of his problems. *All* of them.

I have pastor friends who *love* this. They intentionally wear clergy collars on airplanes, both because they hope it will help them get excellent service, and so people will use that flying time for a pastoral counseling appointment. I have other pastor friends who have made-up stories about jobs that they, in fact, do *not* have, so that they might fly in anonymity. I stand somewhere in between. I enjoy chatting with others briefly and am happy and proud to tell them that I'm a United Methodist pastor, but I'd prefer not to go into any *depth*. Let's not talk

about anything *important*, okay? Because I know I should extend Christ's love to you, but I also have a book to read...

I suspect that pastors are not the only ones who feel this ambivalence around talking to others: strangers or sometimes even friends. Most of us seem to have mixed feelings about telling our life stories. And we may feel even more anxious about telling the story we all share, though Luke's gospel tells us that this is our mission: to go out and share the hope of Christ with the world.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus and his disciples have been traveling from place to place, teaching, preaching, and healing. They have experienced amazing things together: watching Jesus heal and teach, learning through parables, and feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. And here in the tenth chapter of Luke, Jesus expands the mission: he doesn't just do it all himself, or rely on the twelve disciples, but he sends out seventy others with the responsibility and authority of Jesus' own work: to preach, teach, and heal. And lest we think to ourselves, "well that was those seventy – Jesus didn't mean me!" scholars assure us that the number seventy is meant to imply all of humanity.

And so the sending of the seventy extends to us: the mission Christ sent these servants on is the same mission we have in the Browns Point neighborhood of Tacoma, Washington today. We can spend hours and days and years working on the particulars of a mission statement, and set smart goals for ourselves as a congregation, but the bottom line of why we exist, what our purpose is as a church, is here in Luke's gospel. We are called to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world, to go where Christ would go and prepare the way for the Holy

Spirit to work in the lives of everyone we meet by sharing the hope of the gospel in the powerful name of Jesus.

It's a daunting thing, especially in an age of street-corner preachers and "Christian" protesters who spread a message of hate and exclusivity in the name of the church. Those who have been spreading the word haven't exactly made it look attractive. It's easier for us to say, "Well, I think the best way to tell people about Jesus is simply to live a Christian life." And living in a particular way *is* important, but Jesus tells us that our mission is both to live a certain way *and* to share the good news. The particulars are outlined in Luke 10:

First, the mission is *out there*. As much as we need to take care of ourselves as a community, to love each other, pray for each other, build each other up in love and encourage each other in the life of discipleship, our mission is to reach out. Jesus sent the seventy "on ahead of him to every town and place where he intended himself to go." They didn't have to go it alone – they were sent together in pairs, in community – but they were *sent*. We are called, too, to go out, to reach out, to always be thinking about who else is out there just waiting to be invited, to be included, to hear the message of hope that is available to all of us. And we're called to share that message in whatever way others can receive it, not to require them to speak our language or understand our community's particular culture before they can receive the message of hope.

I had the good fortune to spend a few weeks in France as a high school student on a short-term student exchange program. And I quickly learned there that, while my French was not good, to say the least, I had to at least *try* to speak the language if I wanted to communicate, even though I knew that almost everyone there spoke near-fluent English. My

experience was that if I approached people with English, they pretended not to understand me, but if I attempted something in French, they would quickly honor my attempt and guide me to where I needed to go, in English if necessary. This is *not* how Christ calls us to share the gospel, requiring others to at least attempt speaking *our* language before we'll reciprocate by offering something in return. We're called to meet others where they are so they might have the best opportunity to hear the good news and respond.

So the first part of the mission is that we are to *go out, together* as a community. The second piece is that the mission we are on is a holistic mission: to teach, preach, and heal. Jesus calls us to spread the good news with words and deeds, by speaking and healing. It's easy to err on one side or the other: where I grew up, in the Bible belt, it seemed like people were better at the teaching and preaching part, but we often left out care for people's whole selves through healing. We preached a big game, but fell short on providing for people's needs and healing bodies, relationships, and societies. Here in the northwest, I think the opposite may be true: we like to help people – we get the healing part – but we want so badly to be open and inclusive of others that we sometimes fail to teach and preach. We do the work of healing, but we neglect to tell others the good news of the hope of the kingdom. Christ calls us to the whole shebang: teaching, preaching, and healing. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was intentional about teaching that faith must be a balance of proclaiming and living the gospel – practicing what you preach, so to speak, but doing both preaching and practicing. We are called to the same balance today – living out the gospel with our lives, and sharing the good news with our words, as well, as we carry out the holistic mission of Jesus.

And the word that the seventy were sent out with is the word we are called to share, too: “the kingdom of God has come near.” It’s a word of hope, a word of peace, for all who hear it. Jesus didn’t say, “Go out and persuade everyone you meet to believe in the gospel.” Nor did he tell the seventy, “Go and coerce people to join our cause.” And while we often frown our brows at the “shake off the dust from your sandals” part of this story, Jesus was telling the seventy to share the word of hope with everyone no matter what – to remind them that *they* are loved and called no matter what. When the seventy encountered those who did not respond positively to their message, they were instructed not to offer curses or judgment, but still to proclaim, “the kingdom of God has come near,” no matter what.

That takes a lot of pressure off, friends! Our proclamation is that the kingdom has come near, that Christ’s love is available, no matter how people respond. We don’t have to fear rejection of our message, because our job is not to “win” others for Christ or convince them to make commitments of their lives: our job is to proclaim that the grace and love of Christ are available to everyone, to prepare them to receive the Holy Spirit, who goes before and comes after us. It’s not all up to us – we’re not going on this mission *instead of* Jesus. Jesus sent out the seventy on ahead of him to prepare the way. We’re going *with* Jesus, proclaiming hope and peace to those who agree with us, who immediately buy in to our story, and to those who don’t. We are not alone in this work – we simply join what God is already doing around us.

Jesus sent out the seventy without any possessions. He sent them out the way he went out – vulnerable, humble, focused on the task at hand with no distractions available. Nothing expected and nothing received, traveling lightly, giving and receiving peace. It sounds difficult to us, we who have *many* possessions, many distractions, and many expectations. But if you

read further, in verse 17, it says, “The seventy returned with joy.” It’s funny how it works that way: maybe it really is better to give than to receive, as Acts says. But that’s how it works, isn’t it? When you share God’s love, your heart is filled with it, too. When you spread a message of peace, peace begins to rule your life. When you preach a word of hope, hope wells up within you. And before you know it, your life, like those seventy, is full of joy, too.

As we move forward together at Browns Point United Methodist Church, we must remember that we have a mission – not from the bishop or the Book of Discipline or the district superintendent or from our charter as a church – but from Christ himself. We are called to go out together to share the good news that the kingdom of God has come near. And Jesus tells us that we’re not going out to practice something difficult, to build our character, to make life harder than it already is: the harvest is plentiful, he says. The field is ripe. Hearts are ready. Hope is abundant. Everything is prepared for us. We are simply the laborers. And we’re on a mission to bring hope to the world. Amen.