

## THE MISSION – THEN AND NOW

**TEXT:** Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Most of you know that I'm an intrepid traveler. And I am usually a light packer. Now, most travelers I know begin their packing a week – or more – before the trip. Then they add or remove items as their priorities and perceived needs change. I do leave an open suitcase, the smallest that I can manage, and toss a thing or two in ahead of time, but most of my packing is done the night before, or the morning of my departure if it is not too early. The only time I check luggage at the airport is if I'm traveling overseas. I pack light, with only carry-ons, and if I've forgotten something I'll just do without or purchase it at my destination.

Well, as with just about everything, Jesus does much better. As he prepares to send the early missionaries out, he tells them to take far less, as in nothing – no money (yikes, how could I travel anywhere without at least one piece of plastic?), no *anything* – just what they happen to be wearing. They are to be dependent on the kindness of strangers. Gee, my control issues are a little too strong for that. I'd probably at least stuff some underwear and shampoo in my pockets and hope he wouldn't notice.

You know, we think of the twelve apostles, but here we learn that there were more. Our story speaks of the seventy. This was a kind of “internship”, a training time while Jesus was still with them. The mission was the same as Jesus' own ministry: “cure the sick” and “say to them, ‘the kingdom of God has come near to you.’”

Now, notice that Jesus sent them out in pairs. Why do you suppose he did that? I think he realized that with two, there is always someone to be encouraging if one of the pair is discouraged, to keep faith if one is dispirited, and to carry on when one feels tempted to quit. This discipleship thing can be hard, but it's always easier with a companion. I think about other groups that travel in pairs like the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. This could well be for safety reasons. If you have to do something dangerous

or risky, you want to have somebody with you. It's also a sign that "we're in this together" as followers of Jesus.

What I find particularly amazing about this passage is not the miracles these early disciples performed, but their willingness to be dependent on others. Think about it. No purse, no bag, no sandals and, importantly, no guarantees about how they will be received. All they have is the promise of Jesus to go with them, to do great things through them, and to bring them home again. I sometimes wonder if we could match the decline of the church to the rise in disposable income in our cultures. There is something about wealth that creates the illusion of independence, that insulates us (at least for a time) from the vicissitudes of life, and that spurs us to imagine that we really don't need God or each other.

We are told that "The harvest is plentiful". That's as true today as it was in Jesus' time. In questionnaires that ask about religious affiliation today we see that the "nones" are the fastest growing group. The term "The None Zone" has aptly been applied to the Pacific Northwest Area of our country, but I understand that the East Coast is rapidly catching up to us. So, yes, today the mission field is very large and those who ascribe to the mission statement are few indeed.

Notice that Jesus only tells the seventy apostles what they should do and he doesn't say a word about measuring their success. If people don't accept your message, he says, shake the dust off your feet and move on. It's really hard for us not to measure our successes - or failures. We live with membership figures, giving levels, budgets, annual reports, and so many more "metrics". It's easy for us to measure our work by these figures - and that is how so much of the church measures ministry. But if we make it our ministry to help the needy, to serve those who are lost or forgotten, to console the sick and bereaved, and to celebrate with those who rejoice, there is no measure for that.

We hear today a lot of folks despair over the decline of the church and then go on to describe their own feelings of helplessness. "We are not big enough to make a

difference..." or "We're not rich enough", or "we don't have the resources". But in today's story Jesus sends out just 70 disciples. Not 700 or 7000, but 70. But think what they accomplish! Not only in this story, with the powers of evil submitting to them, but also and especially in the months and years ahead, as this group is the core of the disciples who, after Pentecost, will preach and teach the Gospel and take the good news to the ends of the earth. In later years their descendents will build hospitals and orphanages and refugee centers and all sorts of institutions that profoundly touch the lives around them. Just 70 people in the beginning, and with faith and courage they changed the world.

Okay, now, we acknowledge that this story is about the beginnings of the church, a time when people were really excited to get the word out about Jesus and the Kingdom, about God's grace and God's love for everyone, about the message of forgiveness and redemption. That was then, and we are in the here and now. Is "the mission" still relevant? Are there still people with the excitement, the zeal, the "calling" to take on such a mission, in today's world? I know there are many and their stories are all worth sharing. But I'd like to pinpoint just two, at least one of whom some of you know, or have been introduced to his work.

At this year's Annual Conference, among the fifteen retirees, were a couple who stand out for their work in support of God's kingdom. Neither of them retired as parish ministers serving our local churches. Both of them had very special ministries that touched hundreds of lives.

Lyda Pierce served the church for 38 years, starting as a pastor in churches in eastern Grays Harbor County. But her real calling was working in the difficult context of helping people at the margins, especially women. Speaking fluent Spanish, Lyda lived first in war-torn Nicaragua, then in the indigenous highlands of Guatemala, and finally in Honduras, witnessing firsthand the effects of grinding poverty. In the wake of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, Lyda helped coordinate pastoral care responses to the trauma experienced throughout the region, and then later served as dean of an ecumenical grassroots seminary

in Honduras, equipping church workers for challenging ministries in a country traumatized by gangs and globalization. Yes, we still have missionaries sent out to bring God's love and grace to the marginalized in our world.

Some of you, I know, have heard Lyda's husband Paul Jeffrey, speak about his 41-year work as a photo journalist, telling stories using both images and words about how God is moving in the world to empower people who've too long been relegated to the margins. His work often found him with people who are traumatized, who are hungry, places like Darfur or Columbia or Gaza, more recently in the Horn of Africa. He is there to document what's going on with them and to help them tell their story.

Paul has said that he's constantly amazed at the hospitality of the poor. "I can't tell you," he says, "how many times I've been welcomed to a dirt-floor, tent or house of someone who's extremely poor, but they can't wait to offer me something to drink or to eat on their only chair to sit on. I'm continually evangelized by the poor. But that encounter makes demands on me because of where I come from." This must be something like what those first 70 apostles felt in their travels.

Paul's words could have come from those 70 early missionaries, and they should speak to each of us today. He says: "In some ways (my experiences) show me how Jesus comes to us in the poor I mean, the gospel talks about how we're supposed to respond to people who are poor and hungry, and in jail and naked and thirsty. But I think that's in some ways a gimmick to get us to find Jesus in these people so that Jesus can minister to us through them. At the end of the day, it's that encounter with Christ who comes to us in the poor and in those who are hurt and are suffering, that really nourishes my spirit and my soul, that makes me whole, and that keeps me doing what I do day after day and week after week."

So, I would ask of each of us: What might it mean for us to remember Jesus' counsel and command and work and dream together of a more vibrant witness to the Christian faith? What might it mean to think about those things our congregations can do

for our communities? Of things that we assuredly cannot accomplish alone but might venture together? I'd welcome your thoughts.

I will end by quoting St. Teresa of Avila's well-known saying, reminding us that now we carry on the ministry that Jesus gave us:

Christ has no body on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out to the world.  
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.  
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless others now.

Can we do it? Amen.