

How Shall We Go?

As we continue to explore the section of Luke known as the "Travel Narrative" we discover that Jesus isn't the only one doing a lot of traveling. In today's reading Jesus sends out a group of disciples on a mission. Now, we might be familiar with another story in the gospels where Jesus sends out the twelve apostles on a mission just like this—in fact Luke has that story, too, at the beginning of chapter 9. But in this case he sends out a much larger group. There's a little wrinkle in the Greek text of verse 1, so some of our English versions say that he sends out 70 and others say 72. But whichever it is, it's clear that he sends out a much larger group than he did earlier. Their assignment is twofold—as they travel through the little farming and fishing villages scattered around Galilee, they are to do just what Jesus has been doing all along—healing the sick and proclaiming the news that the kingdom of God has come near.

With this picture in our minds, I'd like to focus in on two different aspects of their mission—first the who, and then the how.

By sending out these 70 or 72, Jesus makes an important statement about who he sends out into the world to do work of the kingdom of God. He doesn't limit it to just the 12 apostles. In fact as I try to picture Jesus leading a group of disciples cross-country toward Jerusalem, even having 70 people with him seems like a big group to travel with. So it's seems reasonable that by sending out this group of 70, Jesus is actually sending out everyone who is with him on

this journey. And Luke's point in telling this story is that Jesus continues to send all of us into the world, to go before him, to prepare the people we meet to welcome him and the gift of God's kingdom.

By sending everyone Jesus also signals that the “important” work of his kingdom, the spiritual work of preaching and healing, isn't reserved for a special few--while everyone else is just their supporting cast, or cheering section, or even just along for the ride.

Our form of being the church has a built-in temptation create this sort of false division of labor. For good reasons, we ordain people to certain forms of ministry. We believe that along with a call from God and the church pastors should have certain credentials—including theological education and practical training. And it may, in fact, take particular gifts and training to preach or lead worship every Sunday year after year—but pastors aren't the only people who can pray or lead a class or a Bible study, or even preach a sermon. There are many other people in any church who can do those things! Every one of us is called—through word and deed—to do Jesus' work.

A central tenet of our Reformation heritage is a belief in what the reformers called the perspecuity of Scripture—a fancy word that mean that the basic teaching of Scripture can be understood by anyone who can read. This goes hand-in-hand with our belief in the priesthood of all believers—which says that all Christians are sent to do the work of the kingdom of God in every sphere

of life. But we are tempted to underestimate what so-called “ordinary” Christians can do.

My very first training in leading Bible study and worship and prayer came when I was in college—when I was just a baby Christian who had been following Jesus for just a year or two. Our campus fellowship’s connection with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship led us to believe that even teenagers could guide each other on the road of following Jesus—given some training and guidance. And in my time as a campus staff member with InterVarsity, I mentored some impressive young leaders. Most of them went on to become engineers and computer scientists and professional musicians—and lifelong disciples who are lay leaders in their churches. So the who in this story is you.

I’d like to settle in for the rest of our time on how Jesus sends all these workers into the harvest. The first piece, which I’ll touch on just very briefly, is to notice that he sent them out in pairs. There were no solo operators on that mission. We need partners and friends and mentors on this journey. We need those who can love and encourage us, affirm us in our strengths and support us in our shortcomings, give us courage and wisdom when things get tough, keep us honest with ourselves and help us to not take ourselves too seriously.

The place I’d really like to focus is on two vitally important aspects of the attitude that Jesus instills in the 70.

The first of these is hopefulness. Jesus begins with a wonderfully hopeful statement as he sends these workers out. He says, “The harvest is plentiful ...” As

they go on their way, he tells them that there is tremendous potential for their healing and preaching to make a difference in people's lives. Everywhere they go they will meet people who are in need of the transforming power of God's love. But there are points in this passage where Jesus seems to send a mixed message. He also says that he's sending them out "like lambs into the midst of wolves." He makes it clear that there will be times when they and their message will not be welcomed.

His approach reminds me a bit of a time when I took a group of teenagers from the Chazy Presbyterian church to meet with the woman who ran the local food pantry in that community. Catteen was Roman Catholic lady with French Canadian roots and a bit of an accent to prove it. She ran the food pantry out of the little mom and pop grocery store she ran with her husband – whose first name was Spaulding, by the way. When we arrived at the Catholic church where the food was stored, she began by telling us all of her worst food pantry stories. She told of people who would try to game the system, of those who used the small cash allowance she was able to give them to buy frozen pizzas rather than milk or eggs or vegetables; she told of times when she had to call the police. But then she told other stories, including one about a woman who had walked miles into town on a subzero winter day to find food for her children, of how she took that mother into the back of the store and served her a hot meal from her own kitchen before she helped her pick out some food and package it up, and then helped her find a way home.

In the face of obstacles and barriers we can lose sight that the harvest is plentiful—that the opportunity to make a difference in Jesus' name is all around us, if we don't lose heart. The message of Jesus is the word of life, and his power to heal and transform lives is real.

The second aspect of this attitude is humility. Jesus instills this in the seventy by teaching them what I'd like to call "intentional vulnerability." Jesus sends them out with nothing but the clothes on their backs—not even a sack lunch or a change of clothing. They have no hotel reservations or credit cards or cell phones. As they go they will be completely dependent upon the very people to whom they are being sent to heal and preach.

Jesus wants them and us to cultivate this intentional vulnerability when we go into the world in his name. Because if we are to be his emissaries and embody his values there is no place for a sense of superiority. And that can be present in us in ways that we might not even recognize.

On my trips to Kenya a constant point of sensitivity has been where our travelers should stay when they're not staying in people's homes. Staying in homes has its limits. Showing hospitality is a moral obligation in Kenyan culture—people give their guests their absolute best even if they can't afford it. So on our trips, at times we needed to stay in hotels—or guest houses as they're called in Kenya.

On my first trip, following the advice of the Kenyan man who made our in-country travel arrangements, we were booked for several nights at the Meru

Slopes Hotel while we were in Meru Town. It turned out to be about the most modern and expensive place—by local standards—that we could have possibly stayed.

Our guide booked us there for reasons of security as much as anything. But it sent some very mixed messages when we left our hotel, traveled over the dustiest roads I've ever traveled to deliver food donations to the town of Thraka which was suffering a decades-long drought, and then went back to our hotel where the Kenyan hotel staff literally cleaned my dusty shoes for me. In fact, when the next group from our presbytery went, our Kenyan friends asked them to find a more modest place to stay.

We didn't want to put on airs, but that was the message received by many of our friends. The best times on those trips have been when we have been able to come as learners and partners—to acknowledge our ignorance and humbly accept the hospitality so freely given.

Along with economic status, there are other kinds of hierarchies in our society—hierarchies of education, and race, and gender, and age—that we may not even notice—but that we need to leave behind. To be agents of the kingdom of God we must allow ourselves to be guests in other people's lives—learners and partners—especially those whose life experiences are much different than ours.

Humility begins with recognizing that the good we do is because of God's power, not ours. God is the one—not us—who heals and transforms lives. The

message of the kingdom isn't something we possess. I've been thinking about the way that we call it the good news—news isn't something we possess, it isn't something we've figured out, it's just something we heard and think is worth passing on to someone else. As I've quoted before from D.T. Niles of India, "Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

The last piece comes when the seventy return excited about what has happened. Jesus is excited with them, but then he says, "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Our worth is not measured in terms of success—our worth is intrinsic to who we are as those who have been loved and embraced by God in Jesus Christ. Our service in his name isn't about accomplishment but about living and moving in God's grace.

In closing, although we may fear at times that when we go Jesus' name our words and deeds will not be welcome, this may actually be a time of great opportunity. A lot has happened in the past few decades to humble the church, to free us from a sense of superiority. We've also learned a lot about the subtle ways in which we communicate a lack of humility in our dealings in the world.

Meanwhile the harvest is plentiful—we are surrounded by neighbors near and far who have great potential to receive the news of Jesus as good news. But the laborers are few! So pray that the Lord will send workers—and then pray

for one way, big or small, that you might enter with hopefulness and humility into that harvest field. Amen.

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