

“On the Journey: Traveling with God Nothing for the Journey”

Luke 10:1-11

July 25, 2021

Look, Jesus, this is no way to build your brand, to increase your fan base, to attract a wider following. Most of us are understandably hesitant to go when the one doing the sending describes us as sheep walking into a pack of wolves. Perhaps, Jesus, you would be better off to try an inspirational speech or lively pep talk before sending followers out into this plentiful harvest. You may find that those willing to labor in this particular vineyard are few and far between. Sheep in the midst of wolves! Who wants to play that role?

But this is not all the bad news for these seventy gospel-laborers. They are commanded to go absolutely empty-handed, without even the most basic provisions necessary for the road. No money, no backpack, no shoes. Unequipped (or, as one commentator writes, “de-equipped”) vulnerable sheep. Jesus, acutely aware of how perilous the work of the gospel would be, allowed his emissaries to make no preparations as he sent them out.

Sheep. As the seventy sheep disappear two-by-two into the dusty roads before them, Jesus describes what their mission will be. They are to offer peace. They are to accept hospitality. They are to heal the sick. They are to preach the gospel. The peace that they give will be the peace of Jesus himself. I think that is why Luke is so careful, so attentive to detail, to tell us that there were indeed seventy of them. For just as God commanded Moses to gather seventy elders to share the unbearable load of the wilderness wandering, when Moses’ back was breaking under its weight, Jesus appoints precisely that number of followers. Then he pushes them out beyond their comfort zones and into the world. “Go on *your* way.” No longer

protected, no longer safe on the sidelines listening to the stories and sermons of Jesus, no longer covered by his presence, these followers are now apostles, those sent to share peace and table fellowship, to proclaim the kingdom of God. In short, they are now compelled to put into practice the faith that they had confessed. And it is in this *practicing*, on the road, through the journey, that the seventy are transformed from bystanders to active participants in the work of God. It is on the way that God’s work of transformation takes place in their lives.

If we want to experience that same transformation, if we want to have that same experience, there is much in this story for us to take to heart. There is first the honest assessment of risk and challenge. There is that command to go empty-handed. There is the requirement—stated twice—to eat what is placed before them. This would be especially challenging for some of our children. These disciples are to carry with them no money or swords—those would be used to display power. No food or supplies—those would indicate self-sufficiency. No sandals for their feet—those would be used to guarantee comfort. No power, no self-sufficiency, no comfort. They must leave all of these luxuries and even the necessities at home. Instead, the seventy are equipped with one item. All they carry is a message: the kingdom of God has come near. This is their proclamation to others, and it is a promise to themselves. The kingdom of God has come near. Notice that they are to speak these words to those who offer them hospitality and to those who do not. They are to be ambassadors for Christ, to live into God’s vision for the world. They are to practice

peace, do justice, perform the faith. After seeing what they had seen, after witnessing so much pain and so many miraculous moments, these followers were sent out to be doers of the word, kingdom carriers.

There is something about the Christian faith that must be lived to be understood. There are some gospel truths that only make sense on the road, or in the food pantry, or at a hospital bed, or in any one of the great number of places in the world where people cry out for mercy, for bread, for compassion and love. Perhaps this is why Jesus sends his followers into the mission field carrying only the message that the kingdom of God has come near. Perhaps this kingdom only appears when we are open to its presence.

The kingdom of God has come near. If I'm honest, it is that message that is most challenging for me these days. Jesus repeats it, insisting that God's kingdom has indeed come close. Among us, in us, around us. *Really?* To be honest, the evidence of the proclamation appears as shaky as those sheep standing among the wolves. The disciples might have some reasonable, understandable questions here. If the kingdom of God has come near, why are we in such great peril? If the kingdom has come near, why isn't it apparent to the wolves? If the kingdom of God has come near, why is the head of John the Baptist, who himself made this claim, now on a platter in Herod's banquet hall? And we might have some questions ourselves. If the kingdom of God has come near, why...you can fill in the blank. Why do children go to sleep hungry? Why does hostility permeate our common life? Why is the church divided and the world adrift? Why does the idolatry of individualism continue to threaten the wholeness of all? None of these are signs that the kingdom of God is among us, at least not the signs we would expect to find to say the least. In fact, if this kingdom, if this reality, knocked on our door—no sandals, no food, no money—we might be tempted to ask it to leave us alone. If this is what God's kingdom looks like, perhaps the kingdom of this world is a better choice.

But Jesus is resolute. These thirty-five pairs of disciples are to proclaim to those who receive them and to those who do not that the kingdom is near. How could they utter these words? How could they proclaim such a message? For if the kingdom of God has come near, where are the signs of its coming?

Let's look one more time at the instructions Jesus gives to the seventy: they are to enter a town, where welcomed they are to stay—that's hospitality. They are to eat what is given to them—that's table fellowship. They are to cure the sick—that's compassion and care. And finally, they are to preach that the kingdom of God has come near. Could it be that *in* the actions of the disciples the kingdom of God makes itself known?

Now I know many Christians speak of the kingdom of God as metaphor, as an idyllic symbol of life as it has never been and never will be. A mirage in the desert, always beyond our reach and often an apparition of our own imagination. But this is not Jesus' message to the seventy as he sends them out. Instead, Jesus declares that when these believers live the message they preach, the kingdom of God will be near.

Walter Rauschenbusch was a theologian and a social reformer who is considered the voice of the Social Gospel Movement in the early 20th Century in America. At a very young age, Rauschenbusch became pastor of a German Baptist church in New York City, in a neighborhood called Hell's Kitchen, a depressed area in which poverty, malnutrition, unemployment, and disease, as well as violent crime, were rampant. It was precisely in this setting that Rauschenbusch began to develop his theology of the kingdom of God. Later he would write, "The kingdom of God is always coming, but we can never say, 'Look, here it is. Or look, there it is.' Fortunately God does not tire as easily as we do." Even amidst the wolves. (*Theology for the Social Gospel*, 227). The kingdom of God is always coming, but we can never say it has arrived. The kingdom of God is always on its way, on its journey.

There is both a freedom and a responsibility in

making this claim. Since God does not tire, and the kingdom belongs to God, and the kingdom is always on its way, always near to us, we are freed from the weighty burden and heavy lifting of making it happen all on our own. No matter how many preachers and would-be prophets suggest it, the truth is that the kingdom of God will never be a human creation. And yet, if God's kingdom is coming, we must get ready for it. We must prepare for it. We must live in the anticipation of its full arrival. We must tell others about it. We do have a responsibility, just as those seventy sent apostles do. Not to construct the kingdom of God, not to determine its parameters, or decide who belongs in it, or make it a reality. Our job is to see it. Our job is to proclaim it. Our job is to practice it. Yes, there is something about the Christian faith that must be lived in order to be understood. There is something about the kingdom of God that must be practiced in order to be seen.

I think this might be why Jesus did not allow the seventy to take provisions for their journey. I think he wanted them to realize their full and utter dependence on the providence of God. But he also explicitly requires them to accept the hospitality of strangers. Jesus knew full well that these seventy Jewish disciples were headed to Gentile towns. He says, "Stay in their homes." He says, "Eat their food," much of which would have been unclean. Hear their stories. When the disciples of Jesus are welcomed in Gentile homes, it is an unmistakable vision of God's kingdom. This is what the kingdom of God looks like. Shared table fellowship across divisions. "Prepare a table for me in the presence of mine enemies" (Psalm 23). Received hospitality from unlikely sources. Strangers who just might become friends. It's not that the disciples dragged the kingdom of God around with them; it's that they looked for it in every encounter, every moment shared.

As we pray and dream about how we at Second Church can offer a picture of God's kingdom in our city and beyond it, I believe we'd do well to remember this sending story that invites us to cultivate a deeper awareness of those places where God is on the move,

to be witnesses to the kingdom of God already among us and around us, already near to us.

For many years before moving to Colorado two summers ago, Mike Mather was the pastor of Broadway United Methodist church on 29th Street in the Mapleton/Fall Creek neighborhood. Mike's book—*Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*—tells many of the stories of how pastoring in that neighborhood transformed his faith and renewed his call to ministry. At the end of the book, Mike offers some principles that have come to define his ecclesiology, his understanding of the church. Those principles are built on the gatherings of neighbors that his church began hosting—dinner parties in the neighborhood to which all were invited. Mike writes, "As people shared their stories, they were set free to reveal and act on what they cared most deeply about. They met each other where their lives intersected, and in those places of intersection, they found community and kinship." You might even say the kingdom of God come near.

What if the kingdom of God, always near to us, is simply waiting for us to notice it? Can we put down our many provisions, our abundant possessions to see it? Can we open our eyes to its coming? Because, you see, there is something about the Christian faith that must be lived to be seen. Jesus knew this, so he sent his disciples with only the message of the kingdom to guide them. It was all they needed.

I've been thinking this week about how radically counter-cultural and manifestly obvious this message is these days: We depend on each other. It's counter-cultural for those of us who pack our bags so full we struggle to lift them, who seek to prepare for every possible scenario and rest secure (or smug) in our self-sufficiency. Obvious in a time when our communal life and our individual lives rely on the decisions of other human beings with whom we share space and air. We depend on each other. That's the truth—a truth embedded in the message of God's kingdom carried by very human vessels into a very broken world.

Greet one another with peace. Care for the sick.

Share meals across tables. Look for the kingdom of God. You see, my friends, we can insist on going alone, on caring only for ourselves, on resisting any admission of interdependence or shared responsibility. We can be absolutely sure of our right answers and certain in our judgment of others. We can stay in our comfort zones, safely hovering above real engagement with the issues of faith that call out in our time. But if we do, if we refuse to open our hands and our hearts to each other, if we fail to care for the vulnerable and welcome the outsider, then we will risk missing the kingdom of God that has already come near to us. We will risk missing the terrifying, empowering journey that requires nothing but faith to sustain us and trust to support us.

So, Jesus, you send us out. You send us into a complex and even hostile world. You're honest with us, like sheep in the midst of wolves. And so we go empty-handed—with nothing for the journey.

Except, that's not true. We have all we need. The kingdom of God is near to you. Amen.