

“The Sending of the Seventy”

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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Our text under consideration this morning concerns the sending of a number of Jesus’ followers into the world for the task of doing ministry. Two weeks ago, we saw how in the previous chapter, he refused three would-be followers who were quite serious, even PASSIONATE in wanting to follow him. Certainly, there isn’t a church in the world TODAY that would have turned them away, that wouldn’t have welcomed them with open arms- ANY church, that is, except JESUS’ OWN. To HIS mind, they failed to make the cut because their resolve to follow him was not RESOLUTE enough; their commitment to him and his kingdom was not as TOTAL as he fully demanded from his followers.

In chapter nine, Jesus had sent his twelve disciples out into the cities and countryside to proclaim the kingdom of God, enduing them with the same power and authority HE had including the ability to cast out demons and cure diseases. He instructed them to travel simply by not taking anything more than the clothes upon their backs. Furthermore, they were not to take any food or money with them but instead “to depend upon the kindness of strangers.” What resulted was that they went out into the highways and byways, preaching and healing, and experiencing great success along the way.

Now here in the next chapter, Jesus expands his ministry by sending out seventy MORE in groups of two in much the same way God had commanded Moses to gather seventy elders to assist HIM in in HIS ministry. Christ gives them the SAME instructions he had given the twelve, arming them with nothing more than the Good News that the kingdom of God was right on their doorstep. As ambassadors of Christ, they were to faithfully represent him by declaring his peace, practicing his justice, and living out their faith. By responding affirmatively to their message of God’s mercy and love, the people would then begin to experience the REALITY of God and of his kingdom in their OWN lives.

We’re told that when they returned from their mission trip, they were filled with joy, saying, “Jesus, even the DEMONS are subject to us in your name!” They were in awe of the power they now had at their disposal. However, Jesus is quick to check their excitement by warning them of the danger of pride, that MORE important than the authority they have over demons and the miracles they can perform in his name is the fact that their names have been recorded in heaven, that their God loves them SO much, they will spend eternity with him. THAT more than ANYTHING should be the basis of their joy.

This leads me to a very important question: “How does one measure the success of a church?” if such a thing can even BE determined. It’s not hard for us to think of a number of small churches that struggle just to pay the light bill each week which, despite their size, may be considered greater than many LARGER churches in God’s eyes. At the same time, I can think of a few MEGA-CHURCHES with overflowing pews and an abundance of programs which may occupy a far LESSER place in Jesus’ mind. Would you measure a church’s success by its attendance or the number of new members it brings in? Would it be the size of its budget,

especially relative to the year before? Would it be the number of programs in operation or the presence of a building program currently going on? What would be the criteria?

If I had to guess, I would say that the answer is NONE of these, that the TRUE measure of a church's success does NOT lie in comparative numbers but in something much more INTANGIBLE- in the HEALTH and QUALITY of that congregation based upon the FAITHFULNESS of its members. As Christians, we have received the same commission that those disciples did. Whether you know it or not, all of us here this morning have received the very same calling that the twelve and subsequently the seventy disciples did in our New Testament lesson. At the conclusion of Matthew's gospel, he tells us that Jesus gave his followers their marching orders in the form of a divine commission, a holy charge. They were to go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that he commanded. This included the pledge that he would be with them always, even to the end of the age.

There is no greater responsibility for ANY pastor and church than to help create faithful disciples out of their members- to help them understand what it is they are called to do and then "to equip them for the task of ministry," as St. Paul had written the Christians at Ephesus. Only in this way will the church body grow to unity, maturity, and Christ-likeness. By virtue of one's baptism, anyone who is a child of God is NO LESS called and summoned to be a disciple of Christ. When John baptized Jesus in the River Jordan, what it in fact represented was his call, commissioning, and ordination for ministry. With the Holy Spirit descending upon him in the form of a dove and a voice announcing, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," Jesus had received his Heavenly Father's Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. God was in effect saying to him, "Jesus, you've been summoned and trained to preach and teach in my name. I am now sending you out into the world to fulfill that calling. Just know that you will be speaking with my authority and in my power and I shall be accompanying you every step along the way."

With this morning's text, we see how Jesus was now opening up and extending that SAME call and commissioning and ordination to ministry to a much larger group of followers. THEY, in turn, through their evangelistic efforts, were doing the same to others who heard and responded affirmatively to their message. Well that same call and commissioning and ordination for ministry that Jesus received on the day he was baptized becomes NO LESS our OWN call and commissioning and ordination for ministry, and it HAS been ever since our OWN baptism. One of the most crippling ideas to pervade the church over the centuries is that there is a special class of Christians called "clergy" who do all the ministry, while the REST of the church sits back and lets them do it. It is the assumption that the only REAL ministers are those who have a college education, been seminary trained, and now have a title before their name and couple of little letters after it. The late John Stott, who was one of the church's great leaders, quoted a remark of Sir John Lawrence to this effect: "What does the layperson really want? He/she wants a building which looks like a church; clergy dressed in the way he or she approves; services of the kind he or she's been used to, AND THEN TO BE LEFT ALONE." Unfortunately, many pastors, perhaps out of a need to control everything, have perpetuated this crippling distinction. They do almost everything in the local church while many just attend the services and do nothing else.

The fact is that if we ARE a child of God through baptism, then we TOO have received that very same summons that Christ bestowed upon the twelve and subsequently the seventy in our text; we TOO are to proclaim the good news of Jesus and his love as opportunities arise. The Bible says that we are not called to defend Jesus by trying to convince others of all sorts of theological viewpoints. Rather, we are called to “DEFEND THE HOPE THAT CHRIST HAS GIVEN US,” and if we ARE children of God, filled with his Spirit, and obtainers of an imperishable inheritance, then there is a WHOLE LOT of hope you and I have been given! The song God has placed in our mouth should be the same as the old gospel hymn: “I love to tell the story, twill be my theme in glory. To tell the old, old story, of Jesus and his love.”

IF there IS a crisis in our modern churches, it has been the awareness that there has been a real “discipleship gap” among them. Cal Thomas, the syndicated columnist, social commentator, and Christian, has called upon Christians to look at the quality of our discipleship rather than the constant lament about the moral decay many seem to see around them. He’s written: “The problem in our culture...isn’t the abortionists. It isn’t the pornographers or drug dealers or criminals. It is the undisciplined, undisciplined, disobedient, and Biblically ignorant Church of Jesus Christ.”

Several years ago, Bill Hybels, the wildly-successful pastor of the Willow Creek Community Church just outside Chicago, came to the realization that just as many Christians were leaving through the BACK DOOR of theirs and other large churches as they were coming in through the FRONT. He discovered that by concentrating so hard on bringing new people in, especially the un-churched through their “seeker services,” they were doing an ineffective job of training and equipping their members once they joined. Therefore, they completely revamped their entire program to emphasize the call to discipleship in a Christian’s life, helping them to mature into Christ’ own likeness, and then to go out into the world to serve even as HE did.

Not just the Willow Creek Church but the ENTIRE Church of Jesus Christ needs to recover this central focus. For the church to become what Christ had originally INTENDED it to become, there are some essentials that need to be met if we’re ever going to become better disciples. FIRST, we must learn to take seriously the “priesthood of all believers,” that rather than passive spectators on Sunday morning, we actually see OURSELVES and ALL believers as having been given gifts for ministry by the Holy Spirit, and that when we are working in accord with each other, then those gifts complement each other and the unity of the church is expressed. Not everyone is called to be a pastor or a teacher of the Bible. Your gifts may involve service of some kind whether it is as an Elder or a Deacon, perhaps an usher or a greeter, maybe working in a particular church mission or teaching Sunday School. The reality is that EVERY CHILD OF GOD has a gift and a calling to use that gift so I encourage you to pray about how God can best use YOU, and not just here in our church but in our COMMUNITY as well.

ANOTHER REQUIREMENT to becoming a better disciple is to see how discipleship involves ALL spheres of life, that faith is not something merely relegated to the private and the personal. One of the worst as well as most POPULAR excuses I have ever heard as to why people never utter a word about their faith is that they consider it to be personal and private and nobody else’s business but their own. Yes, Christian faith is PERSONAL but it is NEVER PRIVATE. If our faith is actually relevant and as important to us as we say it is, then how can we just keep it to ourselves and not say a word about it to others, especially to those around us

who are HUNGRY FOR and MOST IN NEED of hearing that message? As Jesus himself said, “No one lights a lamp and then hides it or puts it under a basket.” Furthermore, faith has to do with so much MORE than just affording a person some peace of mind. By producing an INWARD CONVERSION, it eventually produces an OUTWARD TRANSFORMATION, one that will influence our homes, our politics, and even the communities in which we work and live. The Church of Jesus Christ is not meant to be a spiritual country club but intended to be a transforming agent in the world- the “conscience of our society” as one write has put it ESPECIALLY as she strives to be a peace maker and powerful force for justice in it.

Still ANOTHER point is recognizing the necessity of spiritual growth practices in our lives. One may still be a Christian but how can such a person mediate Christ’s presence if the resources and training that makes the Christian life effectual are disregarded. If the goal of the Christian life is maturity, then how can we grow into Christian adulthood if we forsake the importance of regular worship, if we say that it’s not important to receive the Sacraments or to hear the Word of God proclaimed from the pulpit. How can we ever acquire spiritual power in our lives if we never pray for one another or meditate upon the scriptures in moments of quietness? It is a sad commentary when Presbyterians continue to rate highest among Christian denominations in terms of educational achievements and yet rate among the lowest where BIBLICAL education is concerned.

Now, I’m not saying we shouldn’t want to grow our congregation and expand its programs into the community- obviously, we ALL want to see that happen. What I AM saying, however, is that God is more interested in “FAITHFULNESS” than he is in “SUCCESS,” more interested in having his people CONFORM their hearts and wills to his own and then demonstrating it through humble service than he is in seeing us CONSTRUCT more church buildings. I have to believe that God judges us by OTHER standards, such as our willingness to visit the sick, to weep with those who grieve, and to pray with those who have concerns. As one theologian aptly put it, perhaps the BETTER question to determine whether one is a Christian is not to ask “Do you know Jesus?” but rather “How deeply have you loved?”

And so I ask YOU this morning, NOT can you recite The Apostles’ Creed or The Lord’s Prayer by heart but HOW DEEPLY do you experience heart-felt love for Jesus Christ and, by extension, his Church? Are they a real priority in your life or merely an option depending upon how your schedule looks or how you may feel that particular morning? Do you possess genuine empathy for those who find it a struggle just to get through each day such as the poor, the homeless, and the handicapped; or how about for those who suffer discrimination on the basis of their race, their ethnicity, or their religion? That is where Christian “discipleship” begins, with the willingness to sit at the feet of Christ and learn. It is to humble oneself in his presence and say, “Lord, help me to LISTEN, help me to LEARN, and above all, help me to LOVE, for ONLY in this way will I ever become more LIKE you and FOLLOW you more closely.” I think those words from the musical “Godspell” said it best: “Day by day, Day by day, Oh Dear Lord, Three things I pray, To see thee more clearly, Love thee more dearly, Follow thee more nearly, Day by day.” Amen and amen.