

Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20: Go on Your Way...

Tomorrow is Independence Day, and I am looking forward to joining the great celebration that has been the tradition in this valley. Everyone tells me it's going to be great! On this holiday, we celebrate our country's hard-won independence, breaking free of the rule of the Kingdom of Great Britain. We celebrate the establishment of a democratic nation that is the United States, even as we learn over and over again that our democracy is not something that was secured once and for all on July 4th, 1776, but that we must continue tending to it, keep nurturing it, if we are to continue enjoying it, and to ensure it is enjoyed by all. So, we pour hearts into celebrating the birth of our nation, even as we are still on our way towards that more perfect union.

So, for us who hold our democracy dear, living our days as citizens of a democratic nation, the Kingdom language is a bit strange, if not awkward; it feels remote, almost other-worldly, irrelevant, even. Yet, it is at the heart of the Gospel, the good news that Jesus demonstrated with his own life, "the Kingdom of God has come near to you."

As we heard in today's passage from Luke, this is the message Jesus entrusted his followers to take to every corner of the world, whether they accept them or not. How is this God's word for us today, living where we live, in such time as this?

Today's reading from Chapter 10 of Luke begins "AFTER THIS, the Lord appointed 70 others and sent them on ahead of him to "every town and place where he himself intended to go." After what? Last week, Pastor Shannon, dressed as Luke, recounted Jesus' interaction with three different "would be" follower of

Jesus. Jesus was now determined to go to Jerusalem, where he would confront the ultimate resistance to God's reign on the cross and be met with God's ultimate victory in his resurrection. From that point on, those who follow Jesus would be walking that journey with him, which would be no picnic. So, each of these would-be followers was shown what it means to join him on this journey. We may have to give up our sense of permanent home where we find our rest and security, a place to lay our heads. We may have to let go of practices in our traditions that we were taught as valuable. We cannot let even our most cherished relationship take priority over our call to follow Jesus... right, no picnic.

We don't know if Jesus got to keep any of these would-be-followers he talked to, but apparently, he found other 70 who said yes to join him even with these challenges. He appointed these 70 and sent them on to every town and places he himself intended to go. He instructed them not to take purse, or bags or sandals, the things that provide for security and comfort, and told them to receive the hospitality as offered, whether it fit into their own tradition and practice or not. Having been warned previously, there was no surprise for them here. So, off they went on their way.

But the surprise did come.... "The seventy returned with joy." Joy, Jesus didn't say anything about joy! All we have heard was kind of doom and gloom about this business of following Jesus. But Joy is what they found. And where did they find it? "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" Jesus said "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you." Wow, Jesus, why didn't you tell us that before...

Even earlier in this Gospel, we heard the story of Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac, how Jesus named the demons torturing the man and called them out and took them out, restoring the man to his health and his rightful place in the society. The demons are whatever that gets in the way of us becoming our True Self as God created us, whatever that gets in the way of our living the abundant life God intended us to live. The demons are whatever in us and in our society that distort God's good creation. And now snakes and scorpions join the demons, all ruled by Satan, the personification of all evil and God's enemy. Just as Jesus named the demons in the young man and took them out, the disciples who have committed themselves to joining Jesus are now given the authority to do the same for others.

Going back to the story, the mission of these 70 who were sent out was to carry the message "the Kingdom of God has come near." The Kingdom of God means the reign of God, where God's desire and God's will absolutely rule, and if you capture the full sense of the Greek text, this reign of God is not just "approaching," but it is at hand, it IS near, and folks can see it and live as its citizen only if they accepted it. And wherever people accepted it, there is no room for Satan and all his minions, all sorts of evil powers.

The 70 returned with joy; the joy came with the experience of being part of that liberating, healing, life-restoring work of Jesus. Having offered themselves wholeheartedly to Jesus' service, they were rewarded with joy that they never expected: the priceless joy of witnessing someone freed from whatever that was holding them hostage.

So, what about this number 70? You may have heard 72, which is in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Earlier in Luke's Gospel and in other

gospels, Jesus sent his 12 disciples on a similar mission to Galilee, the primary region of Jesus's ministry. But only Luke tells this story of the mission of the 70. 70 is well beyond the small circle of disciples that closely followed Jesus. It's the number of all the nations in the world that is listed in the Book of Genesis. The reign of God is at hand, and it is true in the whole wide world. And God gathers laborers from every nation for every nation.

So, who were those 70's, if they weren't the inner circle of Jesus's disciples? Have you noticed, in different places in the Bible, Jesus would be teaching and a large crowd gathers, or a large crowd follows him? And, sometimes, often right after such gathering, Jesus turns to a smaller circle of his followers, his "disciples" teaching them some more. Then, there are those, having accepted the challenges of following Jesus, who are sent out to spread the good news that the reign of God is at hand; they are no longer just disciples but have become Apostles, which means "ones sent out."

Those 70 were the curious seekers among the crowd-turned-disciples-turned apostles who offered themselves to partner with Jesus on his journey towards Jerusalem, announcing the reign of God. They had been on a faith journey of their own and experienced a shift in their understanding of who they were in their relationship to Jesus and God who sent Jesus.

We are all somewhere on this journey. Do you find yourself among the crowd that has gathered to hear what Jesus is up to? Or, having encountered him, are you his disciple with a desire to better understand Jesus and his claim on your life? Or having become his disciples, have you found that following his way has moved you to share the good news God's reign is near?

I wonder if you recall moments in your life, you may have sense that shift in yourself, or felt the nudge of the Spirit to step into a new level of partnership with God. Not all disciples end up in a seminary, and not all apostles proclaim that the good news from the pulpit in the church, not all travel far as missionaries, but we are all called to become God's laborers, who are just as needed now as they were then.

Thanks to Luke, we know that when we join our lives with Jesus' challenges are not the only thing we will face. When we make that commitment to have our life speak the truth that the kingdom of God is near, that God's love, mercy, and forgiveness rule and prevail over all evil, despite the brokenness and violence we see all around, we are promised joy.

To see this Kingdom of God and enter it and live as its citizens, requires a change in our perspective. We need to have our eyes opened, to experience what it is to be healed of these demons that live in us. The Kingdom of God does not come near to us, by us just biding time until its arrival. It is already here, waiting for us to live in it. It is already here if only we accept it. Here, I hear the echo of Amanda Gorman's words concluding her poem she recited at the presidential inauguration. "The new dawn balloons as we free it. For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it."

The Church, as the body of Christ, is no longer just a curious crowd. But the church as God's House has room for everybody on the journey regardless of where we might be individually. God meets us where we are, in the crowd of curious seekers, or as disciples and apostles, going "on their way," sent out by God. Like

those Jesus sent on their way, a church relies on nothing but the hospitality and generosity of each member and the community supporting her mission. God has sent this church to this corner of the world, and has filled it with us, to live out this message of the Kingdom of God.

To bring healing in the lives of the people we encounter, confront the demons in us and in our society that get in the way of the life-giving will of God for God's creation.

Let us pray we recognize that moment in our daily lives and in the life of our church, when we are called to act on the power Jesus has given us, to empower one another to life-giving ways.

“The kingdom of God has come near --- this is true regardless of how long history is yet to last. This freedom and salvation in Christ are present and available whenever we live as the citizen of the kingdom of God.

Carrying this good news in our heart, let us Go on our way.