

4 Pentecost, Proper 9, Yr. C

July 7, 2019

Isaiah 66:10-14, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

I would like to look primarily at the Luke reading this morning, but also briefly at Isaiah and Paul. Starting with Luke, we hear about Jesus sending out disciples ahead of him so as to prepare every town and place where he intended to go. The instructions are strange: I'm sending you out as lambs among wolves, don't take a purse, or bag, or sandals, don't talk with anyone on the way. You may know of *The Message* which is a translation done by Eugene Peterson. He was first a scholar of biblical languages and then became a pastor. His aim was to try to rekindle interest in the Bible in his congregation, trying to keep the tone, rhythm and ideas of the original text, while putting it into contemporary language. Listen to how he translates part of this Luke passage:

On your way! But be careful – this is hazardous work. You're like lambs in a wolf pack. Travel light. Comb and toothbrush and no extra luggage. Don't loiter and make small talk with everyone you meet along the way. When you enter a home, greet the family. "Peace." If your greeting is received, it's a good place to stay. But if it's not received, take it back and get out. Don't impose yourself....Stay at one home, taking your meals there...don't move from house to house looking for the best cook in town. When you enter a town and are received, eat what they set before you, heal anyone who is sick and then tell them. "God's kingdom is right on your doorstep!" When you enter a town and are not received, go out in the street and say, "The only thing we got from you is the dirt on our feet and we're giving it back. Did you have any idea that God's kingdom was right on your doorstep?"

We can look at some of the specifics of this passage. First of all, why 70? Perhaps because the Jews thought that 70 was the number of all the nations in the world. So this is a universal mission. And why in pairs? Perhaps because they believed that it took two witnesses to make for reliable testimony. And then there are the instructions about not taking anything. I suppose in a way these disciples were Jesus' advance team,

but they were sent in with nothing: remember that this was relatively early in the game, so they had no cross, no resurrection narrative, no Pentecost. And their instructions were pretty sparse as well: Go into the town, greet people by offering peace, heal the sick and then say, to everyone, both those who accept the message and those who don't: THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME NEAR TO YOU.

So, first, that offering of peace. Peace here in the sense of shalom, wholeness, well-being, prosperity. So not just calm, not just the absence of conflict, but a deep peace that reflects confidence in God's abiding presence. The kind of peace we can have when we remember that God loves all his creation and that God is in control. And then there's that statement about the Kingdom of God having come near. Don't you wonder what people made of that? Were there questions? Or did they know what was meant? Did they remember passages from Isaiah about the peaceable kingdom or even the passage we heard this morning about God's loving care and about the prosperity and security and safety and comfort God has in store for us?

Contemporary scholars are of the opinion that the Kingdom was Jesus' central teaching. His hearers, living as they were under the rule of Herod and Caesar, would have had a pretty good idea of the different lives they would be living if God was the king. Most of Jesus' listeners would have been poor and powerless. They would have been struggling to survive, suffering, worrying about the basic necessities for life. They were exploited by the ruling classes: powerless and hopeless. They would hear the message of the Kingdom coming as assurance that God hadn't abandoned them and that the God they knew as loving and compassionate was in the process of creating the world anew.

That message – it's going to sound very different depending on where we're standing when we hear it. Those of us in the Western world, while we may have complaints, are still probably pretty much OK with things the way they are. If that's the case, then what would our reaction be if we opened the door to two people who announced that the Kingdom of God was near? Thomas Cahill says that Jesus keeps two audiences clearly in

view: the poor and miserable and those who, because they are neither poor nor miserable, have a religious obligation to stand in solidarity with those at the bottom of the socio-economic heap. For those at the bottom, their only obligation is to trust in God's mercy. But for everyone else, the obligation is to exhibit God's mercy toward those who have nothing. That's us. What God is asking of us is to BE not only those who announce that God's kingdom is near, but to exhibit that with our very lives.

How do we do that? Here's one way from a quote from Mother Teresa who tells us to

"Spread love wherever you go: first of all in your own house. Give love to your wife or husband, to your children, to a next door neighbor... Let no one ever come to you, without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness, kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile, kindness in your warm greeting."

But it's challenging. When we look out at the world, though, it seems pretty obvious that the kingdom hasn't yet come and that there's a lot to be done. I was talking last week with Tom and Sue about how overwhelming it can be. With so much that needs to be done, where in the world do we start? And then Tom told me about a woman on the south side of Chicago who, he had read somewhere, one day decided to simply take a lawn chair and sit at the corner of two dangerous streets in her neighborhood. Apparently that's all she did; just sat there and the violence in that area decreased because of her very presence. Her idea took root and grew and blossomed into a group called MASK - mothers against senseless violence. And now they not only sit at those corners, but they bring food and information about resources that can be helpful to struggling people. One of them said, "Our presence was felt, people began to notice, neighbors began watching out for one another, it was contagious. Isn't that a way of bring not only peace, but the message of the kingdom? Just by loving presence.

Another powerful illustration of this is the life of Jean Vanier who died just a couple of months ago. You may know that he started an organization called L'Arche (or in English, the ark). He began simply enough, by taking in two young men who were in a gloomy mental institution. When he

visited there he didn't see people others called "stupid" or "idiots" –what he saw were young men suffering, crying out to be loved rather than despised. He had been a professor of philosophy and then served in the British and Canadian navies but he left that behind, motivated, he said, by his understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus. He was especially moved by the story of Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples, and our call to service. He welcomed everyone, regardless of race or religion, the only requirement being that they acknowledged that at the heart of the universe, holding everything together, was love.

Because it's still the Independence Day holiday, I'd like us to think for a moment about the some of the similarities between what we think of when we think of God's kingdom and of the vision for America when we are at our best when, as Lincoln said, we're acting out of the better angels of our nature. I mentioned last week that some of our founding documents, especially the Declaration of Independence, set out an aspirational vision – one of equality, maybe not of outcome, but certainly of opportunity. That vision had to do with fair play and generosity of spirit and faith in the future. In our best hours the soul of the country manifests itself in our ability to open our arms rather than clench our fists, to accept rather than to reject. Thomas Paine once said that we have it in our power to begin the world over again. All of that has defined our sense of being blessed by God and of what's sometimes called American exceptionalism. We haven't achieved that vision, and our progress hasn't been a steady trajectory but, even so, when we look to those who came before, we can see their struggles, in the words of Jon Meacham, to press on through ignorance and superstition, racism and sexism, selfishness and greed, to create a freer, strong nation and, seeing that, we can take hope and courage that we too can right wrongs and move closer to those ideal expressed so long ago. (*The Soul of America*)

But in both cases, whether we're struggling for the Kingdom or for a better nation, we can be tempted, as Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, to grow weary in doing what is right. And on that count, I'd like to close with some words from Archbishop William Temple:

While we deliberate, God reigns; when we decide wisely, God reigns; when we decide foolishly, God reigns; when we serve God in humble loyalty, God reigns; when we serve God self-assertively, God reigns; when we rebel and seek to withhold our service, God reigns – the Alpha and the Omega, which is, and which was and which is to come, the Almighty.

God has the final word and it's a word of goodness. We can be comforted and inspired by that. Amen.