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“Into the World”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Luke 10:1-11

It would not have been a job offer that most of us would have jumped at:

Wanted: Disciples of Jesus

Must be willing to work long hours, travel long distances, leave family and friends behind without saying goodbye. Should be comfortable meeting strangers and mooching off of them daily. Must be willing to take rejection without anger or disappointment. Will be responsible for sharing the message of peace ahead of Jesus’ arrival.

Salary: None

It makes you wonder, doesn’t it, how Jesus managed to come up with seventy applicants, ready to be sent out in pairs. This is not the job description most would be interested in.

But then, maybe Jesus knew that he only wanted the ones who were really serious about following him, would not complain, and would be ready to be in this for the long haul. Maybe Jesus only wanted the ones who would not give up, no matter what.

I heard the story once of a young American who wanted to be a Buddhist monk. He went to Tibet and found the Abbot and told him his desire to be a monk.

“Really?” asked the Abbot.

“Yes,” the eager young man replied.

“Well,” said the Abbot, “it means seven years of silence, after which you get two words.”

“O.K.”

After seven years of total silence, the Abbot called the young American back to him and told him he could now speak his two words.

The young man said, “Cold breakfast.”

The Abbot then asked him if he was going to stay and the man nodded. “Then you will keep silence for seven more years and then have two more words.”

So he kept silent for seven more years after which the Abbot invited him in. “What are your two words?” the Abbot asked.

“Hard bed,” the man replied.

“Do you want to stay?”

The young man nodded and left the Abbot for seven more years of silence. At the end of the third seven year period, the Abbot called him in again. “Tell me your two words.”

“I quit,” said the man.

“Fine,” said the Abbot. “It is just as well. You have done nothing but complain since you have been here.”¹

¹ Fred Craddock tells this story in his sermon, “But If the Answer Is No,” found in *The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 161-2.

Jesus makes it pretty clear that there will be no complaining in this job. The instructions are these: go to the town to which you and your partner have been assigned. Keep silent along the way, speaking to no one. Enter a home and say, “Peace to this house!” Then stay there, eating and drinking whatever they serve. Do not complain. Do not move about from house to house, looking for a house with a more comfortable pallet, or a private bathroom, or a hot breakfast. Do not complain, but stay there and share the news that the Kingdom of God has come near. Oh yeah, and don’t take anything with you.

Don’t take anything with you?

Now how many of you, like me, when you are going on a trip, make a list of all the items you need to pack so you don’t leave anything behind? Because how many of you, like me, can’t stand to arrive somewhere and find that you have forgotten something really important? Like your hairbrush, or your prescription medication, or your socks or underwear?

Last week at General Assembly, it was my toothbrush. The hotel provided me with a pretty sorry excuse for a toothbrush, with bristles that hurt my gums and started coming out after one use! I replaced it with a better one as soon as I could. I know. First world problems. And yet.

On another trip, I forgot my bar soap and ended up using my shampoo as body wash for several days, which, by the way, in case you were wondering, works just fine when you are in a pinch.

Recently, on a trip to Richmond, I ended up driving one of our seminary presidents to the drug store because he forgot his shampoo. I thought about recommending that he just wash his hair with his bar soap, but then I thought better of it.

Sadly, I could go on and on, which is why I should do a better job of pre-trip list-making . . .

Or maybe I should call up the number on that job posting I mentioned earlier and sign up. After all, Jesus doesn't want his folks to make a list, or even to pack lightly. He doesn't want them to pack at all!

“Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals . . .” Luke writes.

Sounds great in theory, but let's be honest folks, this is not the American way. In this country we grow up learning how to take care of ourselves, how to be *independent*, not dependent! We are “grown up” when we can live on our own, provide for our own needs, not have to ask for food, or clothing or shelter or toothbrushes for goodness' sake!

Maybe Jesus hopes that his disciples will learn that in life we *always* have to depend on others, whether we like to admit it or not.

Maybe that is why Jesus also wants his disciples to have a buddy, which also goes against our American sense of individualism.

Maybe Jesus hopes that his disciples will learn that in life we are stronger when we are together . . .

Professor David Lose writes,

Jesus sends them out in pairs. Thus, when one falters, the other can help. When one is lost, the other can seek the way. When one is discouraged, the other can hold faith for both for a while. That's what the company of believers does—we hold on to each other, console each other, encourage and embolden each other, and even believe for each other.²

There is one more really anti-American thing that Jesus does in this passage the lectionary gives us on the most patriotic week of the year. Jesus wants the disciples not to be concerned with results.

² From a blog post on this text at www.workingpreacher.org

I know, right?

What else is there, but results?!

How in the world can Jesus measure the effectiveness of the ministry of the seventy if they aren't supposed to bother with results?

But no, Jesus doesn't seem to want charts or graphs or detailed journal entries describing the methods used when approaching a home and offering peace. Jesus isn't concerned with the response of the household at all really, or the number of households visited, or the success-rate of the pair of disciples. He is only concerned that the message *be* delivered. Jesus is *process-oriented* . . . not results-oriented. Extremely un-American, if you ask me.

Jesus wants the message of peace to be delivered clearly and to all. He wants people to know that the kingdom of God has come to earth, that in him there will be healing, and hope, and new life. The job of the disciples is not to be concerned with who listens and who doesn't. The job of the disciples is to deliver the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“The harvest is plentiful,” says Jesus, and I think he means that the world is full of hungry people, people hungry for a word of hope, people hungry for something more than the race to get to the front, something more than independence and individualism, both of which, in the end, lead to loneliness and grief. People hungry for a word of peace. “The harvest is plentiful,” says Jesus, and I think he means that people are waiting to hear that message of hope, that they want to be connected with others in love, that they want to be connected with the kind of love that joins us together, holds us up when we are falling, is present with us in our joys and in our sorrows, and accompanies us from darkness to light, despair to hope, death to life. “The harvest is plentiful,” says Jesus, and I think he means that we should not wait for people to cross the threshold of this church building to offer them peace; rather, we should bear the good news in our lives, in our words, in our actions, in our greetings of peace wherever we might be.

Not too long ago I spent a couple of days in Boston, Massachusetts. On Tuesday evening, I found myself squeezed into one of the mass transit trains of the MTA, packed in tightly between a mass of commuters returning home and Red Sox fans heading to the game. I ended up standing near a man in his seventies, white-headed, tall, and slender. He was wearing a Boston Marathon jacket from 2010, a white boat hat, and multi-colored running sneakers. At one stop, as we were jostled by commuters leaving the train, he struck up a conversation by apologizing for bumping into me along our journey. I apologized right back, recognizing that my bag had bumped into him repeatedly and that we were both doing the best we could do while holding onto the bar above us as the train sped along its bumpy course. We talked a bit more before he got to his stop at Fenway Park—about baseball and colorful running shoes and Boston weather. When we arrived at his stop, I moved to let him pass, and wished him well, saying that I hoped he and his friend, who had been seated away from us, enjoyed the game. As they disembarked, he paused at the doorway, holding up about eight-to-ten anxious Red Sox fans and called out, “Hey, by the way, I really like your necklace!” I looked down at the silver Celtic cross hanging around my neck. “I have one just like it!” And with that, he was gone, forced ahead by the throng behind him.

I smiled as he disappeared, fingers thoughtfully rubbing my necklace. What I heard from this stranger in that moment wasn’t a compliment about my choice in jewelry. No, what I heard from him in that crowded moment on the Boston train at Fenway Park was a message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Peace be with you!” is what I heard. And what I called out silently in my heart was, “And also with you.”

“And also with you.”

Maybe the job isn’t as hard as I thought.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.