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## **“The Mission of Jesus’ Disciples”**

**A sermon by Mark E. Diehl**

**16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)**

**July 20, 2014**

**Luke 10:1-11, 16-20; Psalm 30:1-5, 11-12**

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It is one of the most challenging things a preacher confronts on a weekly basis. What do you say on Sunday morning? What do you say, week after week, month after month, season after season, when you stand in the pulpit?

Personally I struggle with how to say something about God and our human existence that is significant, that connects to people, that speaks to folks where their lives play out in ordinary or even extraordinary ways.

It is relatively simple to recycle platitudes that one hears at a civic club or social gathering. I fear that is what many preachers do. Conventional wisdom it may be called, and it is what is offered. And it kills the Church (Church with a capital “C”) in every place when it is practiced and in every era of time when it becomes predominant.

It stirs no controversy, it engages no critical thinking, it challenges no one beyond his or her comfort zone, it invites no one to action or involvement. It makes no claim of significance to the divine-human relationship beyond providing for our own comfort and protection and, if the minister is really dynamic, our success!

Perhaps we preachers perceive that nothing is at stake. Or perhaps we think that our action will come to nothing and won’t we look the fool. Perhaps we’ve become jaded and don’t believe what we preach.

What do we say, week after week?

I think that many in the pew have the same question: we don't know what to say. We don't know how to respond to good friends divorcing or the news of a miscarriage, or escalating tensions in the Middle East or immigrant children caught in economic and political and bureaucratic wrangling. The words, "Isn't it awful!" are inadequate.

We hope that something significant exists between our experience in the church and the realities of our world, but we can't articulate it. We believe the church should grow, but we don't know why the church should grow beyond the preservation of the institution we have been handed.

Today's Gospel lesson from Luke 10 seems so distant from us 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians. It is completely foreign to our experience, other than perhaps seeing Mormon missionaries riding their bikes into surrounding towns and villages.

Can we relate to it at all?

Jesus is sending his disciples out on a mission. They are making their way through Samaria, a place often unwelcoming to Jews. He sends them out in pairs to the locations where Jesus himself intended to go. Jesus will complete any unfinished business on his arrival.

It is more than the Twelve Disciples that are being commissioned. In all, it includes 70 followers of Jesus.

The number 70 is important because it echoes the 70 nations named in the Old Testament (Genesis 10). This is an inclusive mission: every person is addressed, everyone is welcome.

It won't be easy but Jesus says that the need is so great that they can't wait to be trained. So Jesus sends them out, unprepared, like lambs in the midst of wolves, as he describes it.

Jesus says, “Go on your way. Carry no wallet or bag or extra shoes. Don’t get tangled up in social conversations as you travel. When you arrive, speak ‘Peace to this house!’ And that peace will rest on those who share it with you. Don’t be stingy with that blessing of peace; even if it is not accepted, it hasn’t been wasted.

“Take what people give you. Eat what is set before you. Don’t be fussy and don’t worry others with your own sensibilities. Attend to those who are sick to restore them to health, and say to all ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’

“Even those places that are not accommodating, that send you away unheard, you need not judge. Merely say, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”

I am not sure that today I would be willing to engage such a mission. To be sent out with no Plan B when Plan A fails; to be dependent on unknown people in such a vulnerable way. That is just crazy talk, don’t you think?

Yet the truth is that life is more like a journey than a destination. You may live in one geographic location all your life, yet we are constantly moving. We do not know what might be found beyond the turn in the road, much less at its end. We do not know if we will meet with acceptance or resistance. In our clearer moments of insight, we understand how vulnerable we are as human beings and how our sense of independence from others is merely an illusion.

The reality is that we, every one of us, are already on such a journey. We can try to anticipate every situation and control every contingency, but of course our success with that is limited. Aren’t we already on this journey that Jesus describes to his disciples? We walk it every day.

And everyone we encounter is seeking for the same thing we want: significance, meaning, for some kind of peace in the midst of life’s chaos, healing in the whirlwind of dis-ease. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t want addressed such concerns at his or her deepest level of being. It is no wonder Jesus says: “the harvest is plentiful.”

So what do we say, what do we do, if we perceive our life as journey as one of Jesus' disciples? We are already on our way, aren't we? If we hear the voice of his calling, and wish to respond, what comes next?

We have started the journey, and this journey is not merely accidental. It has some purpose, some meaning.

It is important that we know Jesus has been down these paths before us. It is also critical for us to understand that God will follow up on where we have been and with those we encounter. As the Apostle Paul wisely wrote, "One plants, another waters, but it is God who gives the growth."

Second, we have been given a message, words for us to speak, to be formed by, and to live into. The message is simple. Anyone can say it. It takes no theological training or philosophical acumen or deep wisdom to articulate it.

At the same time, we will never plumb its depths; instead, it deepens those of us who not only speak these words but who live them.

The first word of the message is peace—shalom—wholeness.

In an earlier text from Luke, the disciples wanted to call down fire to destroy the Samaritan town that refused to receive Jesus. As we learned in that passage, the biggest impediment is not them, whomever "them" happens to be—it is us, it is you, it is me.

Can you speak peace, can you live shalom, can you bring wholeness to those who need to hear and see and experience what God gives?

I cannot think of a more crying need in our world today than the need for peace. In Gaza, in Israel, in Syria, in Ukraine, in Iraq. We cannot wait for peace; we must work toward it.

And the second word of the message Jesus places on our lips is: "The kingdom of God has come near."

Peace, wholeness, healing are the work of God in Jesus Christ. Any time that occurs, God's kingdom and God's presence is at hand. Who of us does not want to participate in something so significant?

It is fascinating that Jesus does not instruct his disciples to argue about the Trinity or the Virgin Birth or the meaning of the Atonement—all of which most of us would be incapable of explaining. Jesus does not ask us to engineer social policies for the betterment of humanity—again something of which most of us would be incapable.

It is not that theology or social policies or political involvement are unimportant. The immediate task is one of living into peace and wholeness with those encountered on life's path and to say in the midst of that, "God's kingdom has come near." It is a task that any of us can engage. It is a mission that all of the disciples of Jesus are called to.

It was the mission the Apostle Paul engaged. Like the 70 Jesus sent out into the Samaritan countryside, Paul went into the Gentile world to those who are outsiders from the Jewish faith.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, one of the groups of outsiders: "Jesus is our peace, in his flesh Jesus broke down the wall of division and hostility between Jews and Gentiles, between insiders and outsiders." Paul claimed it was the very act of God's kingdom breaking in to our world.

It was the grand mission of Paul the Apostle to proclaim this peace to the world. It is our mission as well, whether on a grand scale or merely where we live: in Samaria or Rome or Ephesus or Raleigh or Durham.

I know, I know—all of us still struggle with what to say.

One Sunday after worship, an elder pulled the minister aside. The elder had been at the hospital the day before and found out that a young couple from the church had just had a baby: a little girl with Down syndrome.

“Pastor, I didn’t know what to say.”

He went on to describe how he prayed with them, thanking God for their child and asking God’s peace and blessing on their family.

The pastor told him that he did just what he needed to do, that his words and actions were appropriate and kind, and that the pastor could not have done anything better.

Two weeks later, this elder again pulled the minister aside after worship and showed him a note from the young mother. She had thanked him for his visit and his prayer, and concluded her note with: “Thank you for not saying what so many people said, telling us how sorry you were. We are so happy to have our baby. Thank you for sharing our family’s joy.”

“Pastor, can you imagine people telling them how sorry they were?”

The pastor responded, “I guess they just didn’t know what to say. But you did.”

The elder knew what to say even when he didn’t know he knew what to say. He shared the family’s joy; he claimed the child as God’s own; he announced peace over this household. [from Patrick J. Willson, “Who we are” in *Christian Century*, June 26, 2007]

And in that moment, the kingdom of God was at hand.

That is something we all can do.