

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost  
July 8, 2007

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*Scriptures: Isaiah 66:10-14; Psalm 61; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20*

Today's Gospel text is one of those texts that leave me with a lot of questions. I get the point that Jesus sent the 70 out, and that he gave them this little talk ahead of time, but there are a lot of details that are left out.

To start with, who were the 70? How were they selected? What qualifications did they have? Jesus didn't seem to show a lot of selectivity with the 12 disciples, so was just anyone who was willing to go sent out? And it says that he sent them in pairs, but it doesn't say how those pairs were picked. Did the people just pick who they were most comfortable with, or did Jesus mix it up a bit and send them out according to whose gifts and talents complemented another's?

And then this bit about the "harvest is ready." What harvest was he talking about? These days, that language has assumed some spiritual overtones, where witnessing is about asking people whether or not people have accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. But I really doubt that the disciples had any clue about that yet. So, what exactly was the harvest that Jesus was talking about?

And along those same lines, what did the 70 think about that lambs into wolves comment? Were they scared? What did they talk about after Jesus wasn't around? You know, the parking lot conversations, was it something like, "I don't know about this Joe, you still going? Lambs into wolves, doesn't sound too smart to me."

And on top of that is the "no provisions" bit. No Boy Scouting here. None of that "Be prepared for every contingency" It's the exact opposite. They would have to trust that someone was going to take care of them, one way or another. That's faith. Going out to do something, you're not exactly sure what, without knowing where the resources to do it are going to come from. (Hmmm, sounds a little bit like some construction project I've heard of.)

And once the 70 got to where they were going, Jesus wasn't all that clear about what they were supposed to do. When they came into a house that welcomed them, they were supposed to say, "Peace to this house." Okay, that takes care of the first, say, 30 seconds, what was supposed to come next? Or was that it, was "peace", some kind of peace that none of them really understood, exactly what it was that they brought? And then we have all the stuff about eating with them. Essentially come and participate in community with them? They weren't coming in like some hero on a white steed. They came as a guest. They were to cure the sick, that was about it. They did the one thing people couldn't do for themselves. No fostering dependency, no miraculously changing their lot in life.

And when they left they were to say, "the Kingdom of God has come near." What did that mean, exactly? What did the 70 understand it to mean? The Kingdom of God, as opposed to what? The Empire of Rome? Would they have thought it was about some

existence in some afterlife, or would they have thought it was about some alternate reality by which to guide one's life, in which one could exist, right now?

But the next part is even more curious to me. If they don't welcome you, if they don't include you in community, don't show you hospitality, then go out and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you." Whoa. That's pretty graphic. That would make the point. I wonder if that ever happened? Were there places that didn't welcome the disciples who came to them? What did the townspeople think who saw that? Is there anyplace in our lives, or in our world today where similarly strong statements ought to be being made?

What is even more interesting to me then is that they are supposed to say the same thing, "Know this, the Kingdom of God has come near." Can be made to sound like an indictment. A judgment against them. Or, depending on how Jesus said it, could it have been more like a regret? Something life-giving was this close, and you sent it away. How sad.

There is, I think, a time and a place for anger at those who reject God and God's ways. But ultimately, it may be more a case for sorrow. They are the ones who are left without peace. It may not look like it from the outside, but the insatiable quest for wealth, power, or prestige bespeaks an emptiness on the inside, the lack of peace. Something is broken there, not whole. They are someone to be pitied, not envied. Someone for whom the Kingdom of God has come near – but they were not willing to welcome something bigger than themselves into their lives. How sad.

So, the 70 get their marching orders, and out they go. But where are the details about what happened next? Where did they go? Who did they end up ministering to? I wonder if they ever stopped in the middle of what they were doing to look at each other and say, "How in the world did we end up here, doing this?" Were they ever just amazed at what God had done in their lives? I know that if you had told me 15 years ago that my ministry would include serving an inner-city bilingual congregation where we would undertake a huge construction project, I would have thought to myself, "Yeah, right." I could not have imagined how that could ever happen.

But that is how it works with God, a lot. If you just give God a little opportunity to work through you, you never know where you might end up.

And finally, I wonder what the conversations were like on the trip back home. The text doesn't tell us where exactly they went, how long they were gone, or even one story of who they met along the way. It just gives the summary, the results, that they came back rejoicing at the deeds of power they had been able to do in Jesus' name.

And Jesus' comments make me wonder if there had been a teensy-weensy bit of boasting going on as they were coming back. "I healed six people." "That's nothing, I healed 4 people and cast out 2 demons." Jesus affirms what they had done, and promises that it won't end there. It wasn't a fluke. This was just the beginning of what they would be able to do in his name. But he also reminds them that the deeds of power are not the most important thing, there is nothing here to be boasting over.

Healing, casting out demons, these are not done for their benefit, for their reputations. Deeds of power are for the sole benefit of the person being healed, or helped. Followers

of Jesus already have everything they can need or want – God’s love, the promise of everlasting life in God’s loving presence.

And the same is true for us. We already have everything we could ever need or want in the relationship we have through Jesus with the God who loves us, who provides for us, who forgives us when we mess up, and who guides and sustains us through it all.

The only question left for us is, when we are being sent, will we go? Amen.