

Sermon
Calvary Lutheran Church, Morro Bay
July 3, 2022
Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
Galatians 6:7-16, Luke 10:1-20

I remember the day my father attached a pole holder against the front of my grandparents' house in South Pasadena, to hold a short flagpole of the US flag. He became very faithful about putting the flag up on every holiday having to do with our national history. Sure, July 4th, probably Memorial Day and Veteran's Day, Presidents' birthdays. I wonder what he would have done with MLK Day. My father was a veteran of both the Navy and the Army, in peacetime. And it was a beautiful way to honor the national spirit and our fallen soldiers.

In later years, I felt ambivalent about the practice. The Viet Nam War probably had something to do with it. And so did the practice of flag-waving as a proof of patriotism. Patriotic to what, I pondered. That America is great? That America is a servant nation?

I'll tell, you, though, spending two years abroad in Japan helped me to appreciate many of the finer points of our country. Wider freedoms, for instance. Appreciation for diversity. Breadth of landscape and cultures. Openness to immigration. The importance of the individual. All things that were less noticeable in the grand nation of Japan.

Since that time I have become more aware of the successes and missteps of, as our Constitution says, "forming a more perfect union." AND the differences of opinion among our widely varying population on how to do that. I imagine that most of us, in our own ways, are doing what we can to make our country a better, more caring, more unified, more peaceful place to live, balancing both freedom and responsibility for our common welfare. Even as we are noticing all the ways that we seem to be falling apart and away from one another.

As an antidote to any despair, I welcome the visit of Gia Hamilton today, who represents the branch of Lutheran Social Services in Southern California. Did you know that all of the LSS organizations in our country, if you put them altogether, represent the largest social service agency in the US? And that they are dedicated to the values of Compassion, Advocacy, Respect, Collaboration, Innovation and Stewardship? That they constitute a cohort of organizations that recognize that they are sent out by Jesus with confidence and faith to serve the most vulnerable in our society? And that Gia is here to see how LSS may extend its service into our county, on all our behalf? She has already met with Laura Salazar who is compiling input on the greatest felt needs among our various communities? No two ways about it, I am proud to fly the flag of Lutheran Social Services.

And like I said, LSS does what they are doing because the leadership, and the national church and its members see themselves as among the seventy disciples that Jesus sent out in today's gospel story, proclaiming the reign of God and the new law of love of neighbor, through word and action.

Continuing with today's gospel passage, I'm impressed by the willingness of the seventy, who through Jesus' appointment and instructions, were ready to go to the places where Jesus intended to go. Remember that Jesus had turned his face toward Jerusalem, and from the Galilee he was headed in that direction. The straightest route was through the relatively large territory of Samaria, its hills and people and, let's face it, its strangeness to the people of the Galilee. Jesus wanted the seventy ambassadors to blaze a trail of witness for him. With his geographical and physical end in sight, Jesus was feeling a greater sense of urgency for his work, and was concerned that it might continue after his death. So here was a commissioning, long before the Pentecost sending, of an empowered group of disciples.

I don't know how many people Jesus had to appoint before he got to the number 70. And frankly, with the instructions he gave them, I'm pretty sure there were some who might have said, Ah, why don't I catch you on the second round, after I've seen how this group does. Because, you see, they were told not to take anything extra, including smart phones, or pillows, or a change of clothes, or even a knapsack. They were to rely on the kindness and openness of strangers, who would feed and house them because of the message they would bring. Thankfully, there was no ringing of doorbells, nor anybody looking at them through peepholes to see if they should open the doors. Most likely they would announce their presence by speaking loudly, or by greeting the occupants outside their house, perhaps in the field or at an establishment of business. And then they'd stay and teach and heal any who were in need. Kind of like what we do here at Calvary, except that generally people come to us rather than the other way around. This is our church home, with its hallowed halls. We reach out through our invitation to come and see, to come and eat, to come and be healed. And you know what, people DO come! We number about seventy here, right, if everybody would come at the same time?

And what was the currency, the key, that Jesus gave to the seventy that would help open the doors? He said, Tell those you meet, Peace on this house. This peace, Jesus says, will have the capability of resting on whomever you meet. And once it does, the relationship is established. Because the peace they give will indeed be peace. And the peace they, and we, give will actually have the ability to create peace. This is why our passing of the peace in our worship is so important. We are not just saying, "Hi, neighbor!" in a Simpson's Ned Flanders sort of way. We are passing what we have of real value to another. It is a peace that will affect the receiver just as it affects us.

In the fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, he calls it "the peace that passes understanding." What a treasure. We do not have to comprehend all the whys and wherefores of how Jesus' peace creates peace in us. All we need to know is that it works. Another way to translate Paul's words is the "peace that is beyond imagination." Just by realizing that Jesus' peace is beyond our imaginations can itself make that peace real. It is the power of peace that is utterly beyond us.

This explains the confidence of these disciples, as if they needed any more than they already had by virtue of following Jesus along the way. And which might explain why Jesus, upon sending them, would use the words, "Go on your way." Go on YOUR way, with my peace, with my assurance.

And when the seventy return – and here I'm not sure if Jesus had stayed where he was while they all went on their multi-day adventures, or if it was a parallel moving holy crowd, but be that as it may – they are all very excited. Because it worked! They say, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" So they have not only the peace of God, and the story of God in Jesus, but also the power of Jesus, as had been demonstrated to them already. Can you imagine? They would have been bubbling over with stories, the sharing of which would have gone on until after the embers of the campfire had died down.

With the exception, of course, that their peace did not rest on every person. Jesus had warned them. Some people will not be open to you. Some people will growl at you, slam the door on you, greet you with a shotgun. Think about a shotgun: you don't need to be a good shot to use one. Just like it doesn't take any skill to be a troll on the internet, or to be foul-mouthed in general. And if someone uses a verbal shotgun on you – do you know what I mean? – it can be

discouraging. Instead of continuing onto the more promising prospects, it could cause a couple of those seventy emissaries to quit and return to camp.

That is why Jesus' warning is so helpful. For whatever reasons, we should know that not everybody will think the coming reign of God is a good thing. And what does Jesus tell them to do if they are not welcomed? Shake and wipe the dust off your feet. I'm not sure it is particularly helpful for Jesus to say all those words to the opposers, to their faces, but it is important for the disciples. Mary has the practice of, when it's appropriate, to flick insults and injuries off her like this. Meaning, This isn't mine. It doesn't belong to me. Does it belong to you?

And more important than this action is the knowledge that rejection will occur. Jesus already knows what's coming, because it already has, and it is what is driving him on this road toward Jerusalem. He has received death threats, actually, more like death promises. And the only way to resolve this deadly conflict is to take it to the highest court. Not, as it turns out, to vindicate him, but to bring things to a very public point. The one who receives the messenger, receives Jesus. The one who doesn't receive the messenger, well...

The Apostle Paul, great preacher and teacher about Jesus that he was, was beaten, attacked by mobs, arrested, all of it many times. I read this quote from writer and speaker James Allison: "Faith in the living God automatically introduces into the world a process of un-believing." In other words, for every action there is a re-action. Or, the gospel doesn't arrive everywhere into a welcoming environment. In many, perhaps most, places, there are competing commitments to the gospel, circumstances and values that the good news directly contradicts and challenges.

What a life is Christianity, then. And the Christian mission. Might we be discouraged? Yes. Might we be tempted to go another way? Yes. You can see why Jesus asked the disciples at one point, Are you too going to abandon me? To which Peter, God bless him, answers, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!

We have before us, as we have had our whole life of faith, the task of helping God in the re-construction of a world, based not on party, or opposition, or scapegoating, or resentment, or dysfunction, but upon grace and forbearance and kindness and the inexplicable love of God for creation and all creatures. It goes beyond nation, beyond tribe, beyond family, beyond understanding or imagination. Aren't you glad you've been appointed and called? Or if not yet, sometime soon? Amen.

Rev. Brian Stein-Webber July 2, 2022