

February 18 Lent 1

Are You Sharing the Message?

Luke 9.1-6, 10.1-12

Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

**Numbers 11:16-17, 24-30 (NRSV)**

16 So the LORD said to Moses, “**Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel**, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. 17 I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself. 24 So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD; and he **gathered seventy elders of the people**, and placed them all around the tent. 25 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on **the seventy elders**; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

26 Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. 27 And a young man ran and told Moses, “*Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.*” 28 And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “*My lord Moses, stop them!*” 29 But Moses said to him, “*Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!*” 30 And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

**Luke 9:1-6**, “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, 2 and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. 3 He said to them, “*Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. 4 Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. 5 Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.*” 6 They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.”

**Luke 10:1-12**, “After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him **in pairs** to every town and place **where he himself intended to go**. 2 He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the **laborers are few**; therefore **ask the Lord** of the harvest to **send out laborers** into his harvest. 3 **Go on your way**. See, I am **sending you out** like lambs into the midst of wolves. 4 Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. 5 Whatever house you enter, first say, **‘Peace to this house!’** 6 And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. 7 Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for **the laborer** deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. 8 Whenever you enter a town and **its people welcome you, eat what is set before you**; 9 cure the sick who are there, and say to them, **‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’** 10 But whenever you enter a town and **they do not welcome you**, go out into its streets and say, 11 ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. **Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.**’ 12 I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.”

This passage records something not found in any of the other gospel accounts, that Jesus appointed 70 or 72 others (besides the 12) and sent them ahead of Him to proclaim the gospel in the cities and villages where He was going to visit. The number 70 hearkens back to the story of Moses and the 70 elders from Numbers 24 and Moses’ prayer, *“Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!”* In Luke 9:1-6, Jesus sent the twelve on a similar mission; now he sends the seventy showing that proclaiming the kingdom of God is the responsibility of all disciples—not just a select few. This disappoints both those who think of themselves as the select few and those who prefer not to get involved. The mission was the same as Jesus’ own ministry: “cure the sick” and “say to them, *‘the kingdom of God has come near to you.’*” The seventy are to go in pairs to neighboring towns which many of us might not feel comfortable doing. We want to invite people to come to church where we’re comfortable and on familiar ground, or we want the professionals (the pastors) to handle this sort of thing, but that’s not what Jesus has in mind. They’re to travel “in pairs.” We trust this is for safety and for mutual encouragement. If you have to do

something new, risky or dangerous, you want to have somebody with you. It's also a sign that "we're in this together" as followers of Jesus.

Not only is the scope of the mission expanded by the larger number of participants, but the harvest metaphor "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few*," suggests **an urgency** regarding sharing our faith that many Christians don't feel. For a farmer, harvest-time is the most urgent season of the year. Once it's time to harvest a crop there's great pressure to get it in before the crop is lost. Current equivalents might include tax season for the accountant; Christmas season for the merchant; final exams for students and teachers; and deadlines for the journalist. Most of us can survive failure on an ordinary day, but failure in these "harvest seasons" is likely to be disastrous—starvation, bankruptcy, or the end of a career. Today, many Christians lack a sense of urgency when it comes to the harvest of people who need Christ. Jesus says the harvest is great and there are few who are willing to do the harvesting work. This means not only that there needs to be more workers, but that we have to be about our work for the Lord. When there is a lot of work and few workers, you have to get busy. Remember when Jesus spoke there were no pastors or priests, there were just people who believed in Jesus and wanted to be with him and like him. The challenge was given to join in the harvesting work.

*"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore **ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest**" (10:2). When we hear the Lord's words in verse 2, we have to ask ourselves, "Do I pray for the harvest? Did I pray for the harvest this past week? Do I regularly pray for the Lord's work around the world? Do I pray for the Christ's work on the Cape? Do I ask God to raise up and send out workers into His harvest?" Let's be honest: We all pray for the things that matter the most to us. I pray daily for our children; for Nathan and his wife Zoe, and for Greg, because they matter greatly to me. I pray for my wife Jill, because she matters greatly to me. If I get sick, I pray for my health, because that matters to me. If we're in financial difficulty or need a job, we pray earnestly for those needs, because those things matter to us. The question is, "Does the Lord's harvest matter enough to me to motivate me to pray for it often?"*

Every believer is to be a worker in God's harvest field. Every believer is given a spiritual gift from God and is told to use it for God's kingdom. Every believer is to be a witness of Jesus Christ to others in his or her sphere of influence. Every believer is to be a good steward of the material resources God has entrusted to him or her, so that we use the money and possessions God has trusted us to manage to further kingdom purposes. So, we can't pray for workers very long before the Lord taps us on the shoulder and asks, *"What about you? I want you to work in My harvest."*

**Jesus warns his followers that it may not be easy.** *"3 Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves."* Jesus commands them to go, because God will use them to answer their own prayers for laborers. Often we're the answer to some of our prayers; we're the ones God calls to act as we're able to make a difference. Jesus commands them to go with a heart that trusts in God and doesn't seek to abuse or manipulate people. Going as lambs among wolves doesn't sound very attractive to us. Yet, that's how Jesus was sent, and how the power of God worked through Him. Jesus warned the seventy to expect resistance and rejection, and it's the same today. In spite of the message of truth, love, justice, peace, and compassion that we bring; it doesn't mean that we'll be received with open arms. We might meet the indifference of those who have no interest in Jesus, Christianity, or the church. Or we may meet strong opposition. Our message may be seen as everything from irrelevant to threatening. It'll be distorted and misunderstood. Sadly the message of the kingdom will also be distorted, misrepresented, and abused by some who claim to be serving or representing Christ. Sometimes it isn't the kingdom of truth, love, justice, peace, and compassion that's communicated by so-called Christians at all.

Jesus' advice on the mission was to "travel light." In our terms the equivalent advice would be, *"Don't let stuff get in the way or conflict with your ministry of the gospel."* Jesus himself *"had nowhere to lay his head"* and he didn't have a large wardrobe. Many of us are weighed down by the things we own. In our search for prosperity and material security we may have lost the more precious gift of freedom. The 70 are to travel light and not to stop to greet people in the sense of carrying on

lengthy conversations about things of little consequence. Their mission was urgent – there are few laborers for the harvest and time is running short.

Jesus tells them **they're to be bearers of peace**. Peace, shalom, is much more than an absence of violence. It's a deep inner harmony with oneself, with others, with one's environment, with God. This sense of peace is tragically missing in our time. I'm sick about the latest shooting massacre at a school. I'm tired of the "thoughts and prayers" statements of politicians after every mass shooting. We don't need prayers from politicians, we need action. I'm tired of hearing now isn't the time to discuss laws. I'm tired of hearing we just need to enforce the laws we already have. Clearly repeating these statements after every horror is not making a bit of difference and repeating them is worthless. There have been more than 1,600 mass shootings since Sandy Hook in December of 2012. It isn't enough to merely point a finger at mental health either – there are people with mental health issues in every country in the world and we need to fund care for those with mental health issues rather than reducing it, but the ease of access to weapons designed to kill as many people as possible as quickly as possible also must to be addressed as well. The easy access to automatic and semi-automatic weapons and large capacity magazines has made easy mass murder a uniquely American phenomenon that no other nation experiences or tolerates. I would hope that all Americans could at least agree that we need coordinated action on multiple fronts to reduce the chance of these mass murders happening with such frequency. Doing the same thing and expecting a different result is a definition of insanity. What we don't need is more of what has been done for almost 19 years since the massacre at Columbine High School because it clearly isn't working to reduce these acts of terror. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God."* We could hardly bring a more precious gift to others than peace. It's the heart of the Christian message. Peace is what the 70 are to bring to every household. Peace is the most holistic sense of the word is what Christians are to be striving for wherever we live.

**The 70 are told to stay in the first house that accepts them.** Once they find open or receptive people, they're to work with them. We're better off in our witnessing

building relationships with those who are open rather than wasting time with people who have no interest. They're to eat whatever is set before them which foreshadows what Luke will share in the Book of Acts about dietary laws not being as important as people. If things start to go well they shouldn't look around for better accommodations. At the same time, they're to be provided with shelter and hospitality for "*the laborer is worthy of his hire.*" This, it seems, was the way Jesus himself lived. And this was the overall ideal of the Christian community: a network of mutually supporting people sharing their resources with each other and with those in greater need than themselves. "*The laborers deserve to be paid*" is one of the few sayings of Jesus that Paul alludes to in his letters (1 Timothy 5:18, 1 Corinthians 9:14). Ironically, Paul often didn't follow that advice, supporting himself by tent making (Acts 18:3). For the 70 it means that those sent out should let others support them while they doing their mission work.

Their work is primarily to heal the sick in the places they go to. 'Healing' should be taken in a wider sense of including body, feelings, mind and spirit. And 'healing' should also be seen not just as getting rid of a sickness but of making a person whole again. Bringing healing and wholeness into the lives of individuals and communities is of the essence of the Kingdom and at the heart of Jesus' work and that of his followers. The sign of that wholeness is inner peace. Today it's no different. Obviously there is a great need for healing individually and in communities in our nation.

The disciples are to say to everyone: "***The kingdom of God has come near to you.***" This is the core of Jesus' message and an explanation of why people are experiencing peace, healing and wholeness coming into their lives. This is the effect of the coming of the kingdom; this is what the coming of the kingdom means. God's power is transforming their lives and making them whole again. Luke mentions the kingdom of God more than 30 times; Matthew more than 50 times. The term can have a number of meanings: the eternal kingship (*basileia*) of God, the presence of the kingdom in the person of Jesus; (he is the embodiment, the incarnation of the rule of God in himself), and the future kingdom in the life that is to come. The kingdom, the rule of God is both a present reality as well as a future hope.

**Finally, if there is any place where they're not received, they're to leave it to its own fate; judgment and punishment aren't our business which is something contemporary Christians frequently forget.** Yet even those people are to know that the kingdom of God is near to them also. If rejected, the disciples are to shake the dust from their feet. They're to do so publicly, stating their reason, "*the kingdom of God has come near.*" This is a warning, not retaliation—intended to convert—not to injure. Those who witness this act might be persuaded to listen or reflect a little more. The God of the Second Chance is still at work. By rejecting the messengers of God they've opened themselves to a fate worse than that of Sodom, a city utterly destroyed because of its lack of hospitality to divine visitors. Those hearing the message of Jesus are even more accountable for hearing the message of the Kingdom proclaimed to them and turning their back on it.

While we were not part of the 70 Jesus personally sent out, there are principles and values to live out from this passage that are for us as well. It will require reflection on our part as to how we can effectively share the Gospel with those around us and be the harvesters that are so urgently needed. Every single one of us is being called to work in the harvest field. One thing I take from this passage is that **Jesus only tells them what they should do and doesn't say anything about measuring their success.** If people don't accept your message, he says, shake the dust off your feet and move on. In churches like ours, it's difficult to avoid measuring success. We live with membership figures, baptisms, giving levels, budgets, annual reports, and so on. It's very easy to measure our work by these figures -- and that's how many people measure ministry -- but that's contrary to this text. It's far better to measure **process related goals than outcome related goals. What we should measure instead are things like how many of us are praying for the harvest, serving as laborers, sharing the message of the kingdom, how many of us are using our spiritual gifts?** Like the 70, we can't control how people respond to the Kingdom of God coming near, but we can control whether we're being faithful in these four ways (**praying for the harvest, serving as laborers, sharing the message of the kingdom, how many of us are using our spiritual gifts**).

St. Teresa of Avila reminds us that now we carry on the ministry that Jesus gave us: *“Christ has no body on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. **Yours are the eyes** through which the compassion of Christ looks out to the world. **Yours are the feet** with which he is to go about doing good. **Yours are the hands** with which he is to bless others now.”*

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

Have you ever had a job where you had to approach or seek to engage in conversation with total strangers (like selling something door to door, or working in some kind of sales)? If so, what did you like about it and what did you find challenging? If you haven't, how would you feel about having to do so?

Why do you think Jesus sends his disciples out in pairs and not by themselves? Why do you think he sends them ahead of him?

How do you think the disciples felt about Jesus' mission when he told them he was sending them out, *“like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.”* How would you feel about being given that charge?

What is the significance of Jesus' instructions about what they are to eat and what kind of guests they are to be wherever they're welcomed (Luke 10:5-8)?

How would you describe *“the kingdom of God”* in your own words to someone who has never heard that phrase before?

How involved would you say you are in the Lord's harvest today? How are you sharing the message of the Kingdom of God?