

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (c)
Isaiah 66:10-14 Galatians 6:1-10, 14-18 Luke 10:1-20
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
July 3, 2022 [Traditional]

In today's gospel Jesus sends his followers on a "practice run." These people have been around him a while; listening to him, soaking it all up, watching what he does. And now Jesus is going to give them the best kind of training. They're going to learn their future job by actually *doing it*. He sends them out two by two to all these towns, to proclaim "The Kingdom of God has come near to you."

The practice run is a huge success. The seventy come back and report to Jesus, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" They're all fired up and filled with joy and confidence; they're ready to go. And Jesus feels the victory, too. He tells them: "while you all were out there, doing what I told you to do, I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning."

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was training regular people—sinners like you and me—to continue his work. From the beginning, it was his plan that after he died and rose and ascended to the right hand of the Father, we would become his representatives on earth, going out to the nations in the power of the Spirit, shining his light, setting people free from the false gods of this world, so that they can be free in Christ. So what we see the Seventy doing in today's gospel is a model for what the church has been doing ever since: going out into the world and proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has arrived. God's future has come, and it's beautiful, and it's accessible now to all people through Jesus! Through Christ, we know how this whole big story, with all its tragedies and joys, sufferings and triumphs, is going to end: a beautiful victory for all who live united with Christ. You and I get to live out of that victory every day now! We can live free from all the false gods, because we've got the Good Shepherd. And we get to tell other people, this wonderful life is wide open for them to have, too.

There are a lot of good lessons for us in today's gospel. First of all, a faithful church is going to meet with resistance in a world imprisoned in darkness. We might as well just take it for granted that a lot of people are not going to accept the proclamation that "Jesus is Lord" the first time they hear it. Jesus says he's sending us out like lambs into the midst of wolves. And I think that Christians in our country who are serious about outreach are starting to learn what that means up close. When I was growing up I never sensed any big gap between my faith and the culture around me. Whether it was true or not, it was easy for me to assume that everyone in my little world—school, church, work, family, society—was on the same page when it came to basic beliefs and values. Not any more. Not any more. The deeper conflict between life and death is coming out into the open.

What kind of God do we publicly stand for? Whereas our current culture wants to tell us that life can be quantified and equalized and labeled according to some human standard of justice or wealth or utility, Jesus says stop quantifying, equalizing and labeling. You

can't judge whether a human being is going to fit in with your personal vision of utopia. And by what standard are you parsing and dividing people—by how much money they have? By the color of their skin? By Y and X chromosomes? God sees each life as being infinitely valuable. Pagans have always thought in terms of sex, skin color and money. Satan wants us to constantly get caught up in these surface level valuations. What's different now is that the humanist pagans have this new religion that makes them holy...they use the same terms they always have, of sex, skin color, and money, but now their priesthood tells them, let's even everything out. Let's level the playing field in terms of sex, skin color, and money. That's their new definition of holiness. But you know what that new religion sounds like to God? It sounds like, let's mow down our enemies by force. It sounds like the beginnings of a euthanasia regime. To God it sounds like...let's get rid of unwanted children. Sounds like let's bring the whole world down to the same level of hell so that everyone can be equally enslaved. To this, Jesus says NO. Stop this Satanic dividing of people. Stop judging them by pagan standards of success, utility, goodness. That person next to you whom you don't agree with...in God's eyes every individual life is infinitely valuable. And he wants people to be free of human authorities as much as possible. So when we stand for Jesus in today's world, yes, we're going to encounter extreme hostility. For us, it feels like a new thing—but really it's not for the church. It's always been this way.

Now here's the temptation: if a wolf attacks me, I **want** to attack back, like a wolf. But Jesus says he's sending us out as lambs, and he means that. We can't go out there thinking we can win, as wolves. The challenge is: Can we trust God so deeply that we can keep on going out there to meet every person in Grove City with humility, with gentleness, with servant hearts, with love that builds people up? Can we be so sure of our final victory in Jesus Christ that we can put our own insecurities and fears aside, and allow ourselves to be vulnerable with people who are coming at life from a completely different angle than we are? Can we meet all that hate out there with the love of Jesus Christ? It does not mean we wear rose-colored glasses. Love doesn't mean we accept lies and destructive behavior. Jesus wasn't born into the world because God decided to accept the world and just let it be as it is. Jesus was God's willing embrace of a world that beat him up and killed him. Jesus was God in the body, willing to suffer for the sake of people who hated him. Because that's the eternal, resurrection love that changes people's hearts. We can be so sure of our final victory in Jesus that we never give up on people—even people who hate us.

Another lesson from the gospel: get rid of the excess baggage. As Jesus says: No purse, no bag, no sandals. God will provide us with what we need when we go out into the world. Sometimes, I know, whole congregations can get into this mode where they feel *not quite ready* for the mission Jesus has called them to, as in: they're short of resources, short of leadership, short of staff, whatever. But the truth is, as believers we're never short of what we need, when it comes to what we see happening in today's gospel. Think of the rich man who went to Jesus to ask him how he could have eternal life, and Jesus told him to leave all his possessions behind and follow him. Let go of the personal baggage! Let go of thinking, someday you're going to be ready to do what Jesus wants you to do. If you think that, then someday will probably never come! Faith is trusting

God's word that you're ready for the mission now. The challenge is to figure out what you're going to do today.

Finally: today's gospel makes it clear that the final result of the work we do here is completely in God's hands. All the 70 did, in the gospel, was go out and proclaim the message; they threw out the seeds in those different towns. They had no control over the responses they were going to get.

Martin Luther loved the verse from Ecclesiastes: "The toil of a fool only wearies him, because he does not know the way to the city." When we forget the simple goal of our work as believers—going out with the proclamation that the Kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus—we've lost sight of the city, and what we do starts to feel fruitless. That's when congregations start trying to be cruise ships, and church leaders start trying to become cruise directors. But when we simplify; when we go out there casting the seeds of the kingdom confidently, with love in our hearts, opening our lives up generously to other people, practicing hospitality, leaving our baggage behind, not worrying any more about the end of the story (because it's been given to us); when we tell people about Jesus...that's when the cruise ship turns into a battleship. That's when God's lightning strikes, and the enemy is cast down.