

Isaiah 66:10-14

Psalm 66:1-8

Galatians 6:(1-6)7-16

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Tomorrow is the Fourth of July. No matter how we spend that day, all Americans know that we are celebrating the birth of our nation.....the greatest experiment in the history of all humanity in terms of ideals and self-governance. This land was settled by people of all educational backgrounds; those fleeing from religious persecution and yet, of many different religions; those in all walks of society some who were freed from prisons on the promise that they would settle in the new world and those who held high social status in their native countries. That this disparate group of people could form one nation, based on the ideals, values and laws reflecting a Judeo-Christian ethic that included freedom of expression for all religions is what makes this nation unique and precious among all the nations of the world. The establishment of our country was hard fought....both externally and internally. There were wars to be won over others nations and battles to be settled among ourselves. In the family of other nations, we were the toddler in the throes of the Terrible Two's....."No, I won't"....."I can do it myself. Don't help me!" It's a time of struggle when the toddler pulls away from being dependent and struggles for independence. It was under these circumstances that the American ethos of self-reliance was born. It is part of our cultural mythology to admire those who 'do it on their own.' We laud the self-made man. We applaud the woman who reached her goals on her own. And yet, we know, that no one ever achieves in isolation.....including our own nation which received aid from other countries while we got our own legs under us. And the Founding Fathers appealed to the providence of Almighty God as this experiment got underway and yet, we still revere self-reliance.

That's probably one of the reasons that the gospel lesson for us this morning may be difficult for us. It flies in the face of all that we value in self-sufficiency. Jesus is expanding the scope of his ministry by commissioning 70 followers to go out in pairs to the places that he plans to visit. He wants them to heal people and tell them about the kingdom of God. He tells them that the harvest is plentiful. We know all about the plentiful harvest. It is for us as well. The fastest growing category of religious preferences in our country in the Nones.....that's not the Catholic NUN, that's the category of those who have no religious preference at all.....even though there is a category for atheist. These are the folks who either haven't heard about the good news of Jesus and the kingdom of God or their experiences with people who have shared that information with them were so far from what the kingdom of God promises that they were disillusioned and wanted no part of this "Christianity."

I had an experience not too long ago with one of the NONES. His name is Vince and he grew up in our neighborhood with my own children. I've always considered the neighborhood kids as my own kids, so when I discovered him on FB, I friended him. Now, I don't know if you use FB or what your FB feed looks like, but my FB feed very often looks like 'dangerous territory.' People seem to feel free to say things they would never ever say if they were fact-to-face with someone. It wasn't long before I began seeing posts from Vince about the 'crazy' Christians.....and he didn't mean the phrase the same way Bishop

Curry means it. He was talking about the really judgmental and sometimes cruel folks who claim to be Christian. You see, Vince is part of the LGBT community and as such he has been badly wounded multiple times by people who profess to be following Jesus. Understandably, he wanted no part of that. But I kept making short comments when he would say something about 'crazy' Christians. I protested.....mildly at first.....and then pretty loudly.....that not ALL people following Jesus interpreted Christianity in a way that wounded others. Apparently, he listened, even though he didn't respond. Eventually, in a private message to him, I sent Bishop Curry's latest video which was a response to the Orlando shootings. To Vince's credit, he read it and he shared it on his own timeline for all his friends to see with this message: "I'm not a fan of organized religion as you can tell....but this gives me hope for the future with religion as a positive catalyst of change in the world. We just need to overshadow the hate with more messages like this." You just never know when you wander into dangerous territory and speak the truth you know.....you never know whose heart might be touched and changed. My hope is that before too long Vince will find a Christian community that will feed and nourish him rather than wound him.

Avoiding wounding others may be what's on Jesus' mind as well. His instructions to the 70 are quite specific, even more specific than the instructions he gave to the 12 that he sent out just a few verses before. He tells them, "Carry no purse.....in other words, don't take any money; carry no bag.....meaning, don't take a change of clothing.....and don't wear any sandals.....as in, don't protect anything, even your feet!! Jesus sends them out into dangerous territory with a minimum of possibility that anyone could misunderstand their mission or assume that these folks were intent on hurting them in some way. They are completely vulnerable.

How many of us would really do that? How many of us would wander into dangerous territory completely vulnerable? Quite honestly, these instructions fly in the face of common sense. Self-sufficient people plan ahead. Self-sufficient people are prepared for as many contingencies as they can conceive. Self-sufficient people don't depend on the mercy and generosity of others! Prudent people equip themselves for the journey. But apparently, Jesus doesn't see it that way. And Jesus' instructions go against all that we know instinctively about self-protection. These instincts are part of our God-given internal mechanisms to ensure our survival. But Jesus is telling his 70 commissioned followers to set all of that aside. Be vulnerable. Jesus even says, "I am sending you like lambs into the midst of wolves." Jesus knows they are going into dangerous territory. They are, in all likelihood, going into Samaria.....the same place that rejected James' and Johns' efforts to make advance plans for Jesus. By sending these 70 out so vulnerable and so dependent, what is Jesus trying to tell us about how he would like for us to be his advance men? What is he telling us about how he wants us to go out into a dangerous world and deliver his message? What is he telling us about the connection between vulnerability to the world and trust in God as we offer to allow people to experience through us the nature of the kingdom of God that we have been sent to proclaim?

Jesus has other instructions for the 70 as well. Stay in the first house you enter if they take you in. Don't move around. Don't look for a 'better deal.' Graciously accept the hospitality that is offered to you. In this potentially hostile environment hospitality is very, very important. It can mean the difference between life and death for any traveler. Eat and drink whatever is provided for you. Since these 70 are going into Samaria and perhaps other hostile territory, it would seem that Jesus is telling them that they

shouldn't stand on the dietary laws that they have always known and practiced. They should set those laws aside in deference to the message they are delivering. Graciously accepting and eating what is put before them is translated into acceptance of the one who has done the offering. That's table fellowship. That's breaking bread together. And that's what the kingdom of God is all about.....acceptance of all those who are willing to hear the message. It's the same for us. Preparing food is a labor of love. Accepting the food is a gesture of acceptance of the person who is offering it to us. There's something very intimate about breaking bread together.

And these 70 are to cure the sick. They have been empowered by Jesus to do just that. They have been commissioned by Jesus to show people how much God loves them by the care and compassion that they show in curing illness. This is also the way that people experience the nearness of the kingdom of God. It is in the doing.....with complete strangers.....the sharing of the kingdom of God that the 70 are themselves transformed from being just bystanders watching what Jesus does to being active participants in the work of God. It is in doing the work ourselves that we, too, experience that the kingdom of God has come close. It is in the hands-on outreach with perfect strangers that we come to know Christ in the most profound ways. And those folks don't stay strangers for long.

And when the 70 return to Jesus, he doesn't ask them about the numbers. He doesn't say to them, "How many people did you cure?" "How many people accepted your message about the kingdom of God coming close?" or "How many people accepted the good news you have to share?" For Jesus, it seems the numbers don't matter. While we are somewhat anxious about the numbers in this day and age, Jesus seems to be focusing on something else. The point for Jesus seems to be that the 70 have gone out and done as he asked. Success is in the doing. We have no control over the outcome. God is the one who determines whether or not someone responds to the message. The 70 succeeded by simply sharing the message. The 70 are excited because even the demons had submitted to them, but Jesus tells them that they shouldn't pay attention to that. They should rejoice because they were successful in doing as Jesus had commissioned them to do and that their good deeds were noticed and written in heaven.

You never know in your own life who you might touch.....who might hear your words of love and acceptance from Jesus.....who might experience even a fleeting moment of the kingdom of God because of you. You never really know who might desperately need to hear the good news. All of us have a ministry in our own lives. We are commissioned by Jesus to share what we know about him with those we encounter.....family, friend, or stranger. It doesn't matter. It's all the same to Jesus. Jesus loves them all.

Many of you are familiar with St. Teresa of Avila's sweet description of who we are as the body of Christ:

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.

And I would add.....

Yours is the voice with which he can touch a heart and heal it.

And so as we contemplate our own commissioning by Jesus we can also give thanks to God this weekend for this great American experiment in which we are a part. And we can join in the celebration of the birth of our nation that allows us to pursue and practice the religion of our choice.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.