

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
July 7, 2016, The 4th Sunday After Pentecost
 Psalm 30, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
SENT

It has been a long 4th of July weekend when we have celebrated the freedoms we enjoy as Americans, and shared that feeling of patriotism as we watched parades, gathered with our families and friends, and watched special events on television.

As Christians we also have a freedom that is deeper, stronger, and truer than any of the freedoms of our nation, or any other nation, around the globe.

By Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection to new life we have been given the freedom to live as forgiven people.

But the gospel message makes it very clear that having this freedom means using this freedom. Faith is an action word.

In today's story in Luke we hear about 70 followers of Jesus who were sent out to the villages Jesus was planning to visit later.

What we may not realize, is that when the people of Jesus' day, and the century following, heard that Jesus sent out 70 disciples they would have been reminded that there were 70 nations in the world as listed in the book of Genesis (ch.10).

Jesus was setting the stage for his Good News message to be taken out to all the world.

In the years following his ascension to heaven, the disciples and followers of Jesus had this picture Jesus had given them, of God's love going out to all the nations of the world.

(cf. New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX, p. 219.1.8)

The way Jesus accomplished spreading his message of peace, and the nearness of the kingdom of God, was to send out people who would represent him in the towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee.

This is how Jesus still spreads his good news message of peace, and the closeness of the kingdom of God to all of us.

This story of disciples being sent out with the Good News has never ended and today we are the ones who are now sent to show others God's kingdom.
 But what does that look like in our lives?

When I was in college, I had a favorite professor of theology who told us a story about his first adventure into spreading the Good News of Jesus. He was attending the Presbyterian church in Hollywood, California during college. The leaders of that college program encouraged its students to go out into their community spreading the good news of Jesus.

Now Dr. Bruner is a rather short, slight person with glasses and the first person he decided to share the good news with was a tall, burly Marine who was waiting with him at a bus stop.

He turned to this man who towered over him and said, "Excuse me sir, have you been saved? Do you know about Jesus?"

At which point the Marine looked him full in the face and punched him in the nose and

walked away.

Dr. Bruner said that was the day he realized that not everyone was called to be an evangelist, but that some were called to other types of ministry that weren't so risky. (Like teaching college students!)

I used to like this story because it left me feeling comfortable that other people were out there doing what I didn't think I could do.

But my perspective has changed over the years.

I truly believe that the story of the 70 being sent out to the world is a story for all of us.

And I believe we are often called to look much closer to home for those with whom we can share the Good News of God's saving love, the peace that Jesus offers us, and the truth that the Kingdom of God is always near.

I am convinced that God uses us in the midst of whatever our lives are holding. Just as the 70 were sent out to represent Jesus, we too are representatives of Jesus to the people in the world around us:

in our neighborhoods,
apartment buildings,
schools,
summer sports programs,
work,
grocery stores,
the community dining room where you live,
exercise classes and gyms,
and all the other places you go.

When you think of all the places that your life takes you in one week, those are exactly the places where we are called to live and speak and act as followers of Jesus.

I believe the real work of living out a life of faith is often as close as our next encounter with someone. My friend Victor, who is a pastor in Ghana, often tells people: "Remember you may be the only Bible that someone reads."

We are children of God, who carry the Kingdom of God within us.

Do people know that the kingdom of God has come near when they are spending time with us?

Or do they imagine other Kingdoms when we are near ☺?

What are people reading about God when they look at our lives, does it sound like the Bible, or some other book?

Several years ago I was sent a story about a man in prison named Sean, who died of a heart attack in prison. Before his death he had a profound conversion experience and become a follower of Jesus Christ.

The convict in the next cell, a huge man called "Bear," was a skeptic and a cynic.

Each night Sean spoke through the prison bars and told Bear about the love of Jesus.

Bear mocked him, told him he was sick in the head, that religion was the last refuge of the insane.

Nonetheless, Sean passed Scripture passages to him and shared his candy whenever he received a gift from a relative.

At the Sean's funeral service, when the prison chaplain spoke of the Easter victory of Jesus over sin and death, the Bear stood up in the middle of the sermon, pointed to the coffin, and said,

"That's the only Jesus I ever knew."

(Midrash, 7-2-04, Rev. Wes Morgan, First Christian (Disciples) Conroe, TX)

Jesus told the 70 that when they went into a village and into homes they were to give Jesus' peace to that village and house.

They were also to tell the people that the kingdom of God had come near to them.

If we are the ones who now represent Jesus Christ and his peace, how can we help others know that the kingdom of God is near.

I'm not talking about sending you out to evangelize the next person you meet at a bus stop, unless that IS what God is inviting you do.

But I am wondering about how we, as followers of Jesus, can be an inviting community of faith, where people come to learn more about God either from us, or from this church community.

I am also not talking about a church growth strategy.

Instead I am challenging each of us and all of us to pay attention to the ways that we invite others to know the love of God, the peace of Christ and the presence of God's Spirit, when they spend time with us.

We have been given the freedom of living as God's forgiven children. We are given the freedom of knowing how much God loves us.

But understanding that freedom is not enough.

Being thankful for that freedom isn't enough.

Faith is an action word and freedom demands that it be shared.

I challenge you in the next week to pay attention to all the places that your lives take you.

And I challenge you to pay attention to how you live and speak and act in all those places;

because you may be the only Bible that someone reads;

you may be the only Jesus someone knows;

Faith is an action word....so let the action begin...In Jesus' name!