

## ON THE CUSP—ARE WE BEING CALLED?

First Presbyterian Church

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**Let us pray:** Lord God, we thank you for bringing us together at this particular time in our church's life. May today's message be a blessing as we journey together through God's word and the inspirations of Holy Spirit. May there be one voice we hear today—the voice of truth and grace. Hear now the words of the Lord.

**The Gospel According to Luke, Chapter 10, verses 1-11 and 16-20.**

**This is the word of the Lord.**

These are exciting times. As I have watched the unfolding of events here at First Presbyterian and at the recent Presbytery meeting, events that appeared to be an impossibility only a short time ago, I am in awe of God's power to order our universe in mysterious ways. Tomorrow, Monday, July 8, our interim pastor, the Reverend Dr. Dari Rowen will return to First Presbyterian as our installed pastor after a two-week sabbatical to begin planning for the future of our church family.

I am happy to say that she impressed me by beginning her ministry with the introduction of an ancient and profound form of spiritual nourishment, called Lectio Divina. It begins at 7:00 a.m. and is a new part of our weekly schedule. For those who participate, this spiritual practice will deepen our faith and strengthen our church.

For those of you who are visitors or who may not be aware of the situation in this church, after our former pastor moved away, Pastor Dari accepted our call to serve as the interim pastor of our church family. At the time Pastor Dari accepted our call to serve as our interim pastor, according to the Book of Order, an interim pastor could not accept a call from that church as their installed pastor, so it was clear to us that Pastor Dari would serve as our shepherd, charged with our care and healing only until the new pastor's arrival. Through God's providence, our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ratified a change in the Book of Order that came at just the right time for the way to be opened for us to call Pastor Dari. Now Pastor Dari no longer must hold back from wholeheartedly leading our congregation because she has been called to stay.

For those less familiar with the Presbyterian or Reformed tradition, I am including that perspective in today's sermon. Presbyterians are considered to be a people of the Word, as we depend on the scriptures to give us God's directives. Then, our Presbyterian or Reformed tradition guides us in fulfilling those directives based on centuries of accumulated Biblical understanding and insight contained in two books, The Book of Order and the Book of Confessions. The Book of Confessions contains the creeds of the Presbyterian Church. A third book, The Book of Order, serves as a sort of constitutional document.

So, the Holy Bible gives God's directives, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order together guide us in fulfilling those directives based on centuries of accumulated Biblical understanding and insight.

In the Book of Order we have a set of guiding principles by which we live out God's call. It is called "The Great Ends of the Church." The Great Ends of the Church consists of a set of mission statements intended to define the life and work of the church. It brings together elements of belief and practice that can be traced back to the very teachings of Jesus himself as recorded in the Gospels. These are:

- The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind
- The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
- The maintenance of divine worship
- The preservation of the truth
- The promotion of social righteousness
- And, the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world

So, as the Body of Christ we are charged with spreading the gospel, caring for our brothers and sisters, worshiping God faithfully, standing for the truth, being socially and morally responsible, and serving as examples of God's love.

These few words define our identity and order our mission as much today as when they were ratified and published in 1910. During the time Pastor Dari has served as our interim pastor, with much prayer and careful consideration we have examined ourselves in light of these Great Ends.

Now together we will be bringing the results of that time of self-evaluation and healing into full reality with Pastor Dari to lead us.

Let's turn now to today's scripture. It is from the Gospel according to Luke. Luke's writings include more than eight chapters of material not found in any of the other gospels. When I first began my work, one source, *The Illustrated Bible Handbook*, had only a six-line description, which said, "Earlier Jesus sent out the twelve. Now, seventy-two are sent out in pairs to preach and heal. The teams return, excited about the powers they have exercised. But Jesus tells them to rejoice in their relationship with God."

Imagine with me for a moment how it might have been during those times. It is a busy scene, with the din of the noisy crowds around Jesus, the swirling dust from so many feet, the smells of animals, of cooking food, and of campfires. Jesus is slowly making his way to Jerusalem, surrounded by many people clamoring for his attention. As he walks along the road, he talks with those around him, often stopping to heal the sick and minister to the people who cry out to him for healing. He preaches the Kingdom of God loudly.

More and more people join the crowd, and people begin to call out to him, saying, "I will follow you wherever you go." Chapter 9, Verses 57-62 describe encounters with several people.

Then Chapter 10 begins with Jesus's call to 70 individuals, chosen from among the teeming crowd of men and women. It must have been so exciting to be called by Jesus and yet difficult for the large crowd of people who answered his call to hear his instructions. Once a hush comes over the huge crowd, Jesus begins to speak.

He tells the chosen ones that they are to go in pairs everywhere he himself intends to go. He calls out for them to pray for their mission and for the people to carry

out that mission, saying, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the Harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” So, the prayers were his first priority.

He acknowledges that he is sending them out like lambs surrounded by wolves—completely vulnerable and defenseless. They are to travel light and not tarry along the way. He tells them to greet no one on the road. This was a protection against random violence on the road as well as a real timesaver, as the people of that time had elaborate and drawn-out greetings where they would bow again and again, asking about the welfare of family members, and repeating several times their wishes for the peace and prosperity of those they met along the way. This clearly expressed the sense of urgency of their mission.

He instructs them that whenever they enter a home, say, “Peace to this house, and if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.” **A New Standard Bible Dictionary** tells us that In Old Testament times peace was the most comprehensive and highly prized Gift of God. This carried over into the New Testament, with even greater breadth and depth of meaning, culminating specifically in that peace which is the gift of Christ. Luke’s gospel was composed in the immediate aftermath of the Jewish war before 100 AD, so the context is one of long-standing hostility throughout the region.

He tells them that where the peace is shared and they are welcomed, they are to stay at the same place until time to move on, eating what is offered, curing the sick, and telling everyone that the kingdom of Heaven has come near. If they are not welcomed, they are to shake the dust from their feet, tell the homeowner that “the Kingdom of God has come near to you,” and move on. Jesus then seals his declarations with these words, “whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”

After a time on the road the Seventy return with good news. They exclaim, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.” Jesus cautions his followers not to rejoice because of their success in exercising God’s power over demons but because their names are written in Heaven.

Jesus called and commissioned 70 persons, the number 70 most likely representing the number of nations in the world, signifying a mission intended to reach to the ends of the earth. Those 70 persons were not religious professionals or rabbis, but common and ordinary people.

PAUSE

How are these verses relevant to our situation? What do these passages mean for us? For you and me? Are we being called?

According to the Great Ends of the Church, we are as much disciples as any one of those 70 people sent out by Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. We may not walk around town two-by-two, accepting the hospitality of strangers, healing the sick, and telling all who will listen that the Kingdom of God has drawn near; but we know from these scriptures that the mission of the 70 remains our mission today.

I know that my own heart feels the tug of Holy Spirit to be a part of this time of new beginning. During my preparation for this sermon, for the most part my feelings have been of excitement and anticipation with occasional twinges of fear and uncertainty.

Today my fears are laid aside as I remember God's providence and how it relates to our circumstances. The doctrine of God's providence, as understood in the Reformed faith, assures us that our world and our lives are held secure in God's hand. God provides for the world, orders the world, and cares for the world. God guides us and provides for our needs. God is helping us in our decisions—through grace, through use of our powers of reason, through the guidance of Holy Spirit. Through God's providence our church family has developed great strengths, long traditions, powers, and authority that we can claim.

First, we claim the Authority of Scripture. In the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 28: 18-20, during the commissioning of the twelve disciples, Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Known as the Great Commission, this section of scripture holds great significance for all followers of Christ for it is the foundation for the spread of Christianity throughout the world. The commissioning of the 70 further signifies Jesus's intent for those who are called to take the message to the ends of the earth.

We have the Power of Tradition. Our congregation has existed since at least the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and over the many decades of our existence, we have developed long-standing and meaningful traditions. There are special times during each year (Advent, Easter seasons) where we participate in traditions such as the Flowering of the Cross at Easter time or Vacation Bible School during the summer. People of all ages love to participate in these traditions and find them meaningful and precious.

We have the Power of Music as Lisa Hester directs the musicians and singers, as the handchime choir offers its musical notes, as our beautiful antique pipe organ sounds its tones, and as the sanctuary and children's choirs and the praise team sing to the glory of God.

We have the Strength of Community. It is a part of our Reformed heritage that we create relationships with other individuals and in small groups, drawing strength, insight, and resolve from others. From finding a prayer buddy to gathering with others to prepare a meal for the church family, we call on the power of community.

We have the Strength of Persistence, which keeps us going during times of overwhelm or discouragement. Surviving several devastating fires surely is a testament to our power of persistence.

We have the Power of Leadership with a strong and stable leadership team led by Pastor Dari and our Session members, and we have Joan and me, ready and willing to put our training and experience to work for the good of the church. We have strong

support as well with the people called to keep our church going, from the people who share in the work of the church office to those who fill the many needs of the church.

And, we have the Power of the People. With a congregation filled with people from all walks of life, we each bring our own unique heart and soul, our creativity, our labor, our prayers. A special part of this power is our prayer life. We pray separately and together. We sing our prayers. We pray on the internet and in the sanctuary on Sunday morning.

Last but not least, we have the Power of Mission. Our congregation has been known for its mission service since our beginnings along the Saline River long ago. All along our church has maintained a strong sense of mission, and mission remains at the heart of this congregation.

Yes, we are experiencing excitement and anticipation. After all, we have much to excite us. But most of all we thank God for all that has been provided, for the strengths and powers and authority, and for the miracles that have happened to bring us to this day.

Today and every day, let us worship God with grateful hearts and helping hands. Let us witness to our friends, to our families, and to the world. Let us thank God that our individual efforts are compounded by the efforts of other members and friends of the church as we all join together to fulfill our call in this unique community of faith, called the First Presbyterian Church of Benton, Arkansas.

Let us close now with the beautiful words of St. Teresa of Avila:

***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.***

**AMEN**