

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost July 3 2022

Psalm 66:1-9; Galatians 6:[1-6] 7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Jesus is expanding his reach from just sending out the 12 apostles (which he did in the previous chapter) to sending out more advance workers. Choosing seventy of that larger group of disciples who were following him to go into the towns where he would come later and prepare the way for him.

Did you notice what he told them? First, travel light and don't waste time- there is important work to be done. Second, don't look for the best accommodations, instead, take what you get. Extend peace to the place where you will stay.

Remember, peace is not absence of conflict. It is rooted in the Hebrew word *Shalom* which has the sense of wholeness, being put together. This peace is the deep water that nothing can roil. If there is one there who receives that peace- excellent. If they don't then what? Or in a larger sense what do you do if the whole town will not welcome you and the message you bring?

Look back at what Jesus told the disciples last week. When Jesus was rejected by the hated Samaritans the disciples said to Jesus, "Come on! Let's rain fire and brimstone down upon the heads of these sinners who reject you and your message!" And Jesus said, "Yeah! Burn baby, burn!" Right? No, he rebukes the disciples for their idea.

What about these individuals or towns that don't want to listen to the seventy? Does Jesus tell the disciples to smite them? To force them to do what is best for them, to follow the path to life Jesus offers? No, the peace they extend will return to them, and they can move on. If the town does not listen, they are to

make one final pronouncement- “Gang, the reign of God has come near.” A statement of truth, but also one of regret- “It has come near, and you missed it” at least this time. They are not to force the issue but keep on moving.

Listen to the warning present in what Jesus says next, “When they listen to you, they listen to me... do not rejoice in what you can do in my name, the power and prestige it can bring, because it’s not your work to begin with. Rejoice only in the fact that in the waters of baptism and through the Holy Spirit that God has claimed your life, saved you, and sent you out to do the same for others.”

Jesus is saying, get the gospel right because you proclaim me, not you. And reminds us our joy lies not in what we can do, but what God in Jesus has done for us.

This reminds me of what Paul wrote in Galatians last week about Christian freedom. I am thankful for the freedoms that I enjoy as a citizen of the United States. Freedoms that while not unique to the U.S., are not afforded every place else in this world. Freedom that most would define as being able to do what I want, when I want, how I want it. But the secular definition of freedom is not ours as followers of Jesus. Christian freedom, Paul reminds us, is not license to do what we want for our own good. No, Christian freedom is enslaving ourselves to the good of our neighbor. We are free in Christ to serve our neighbor.

This week Paul reminds us that when someone goes astray (takes a mis-step) then seek a process of restoring them with gentle strength. Let us work for the good of all. To restore them with gentle strength- not thundering might. Not with condemnation. Not with threats of doom or harm.

I listen to Jesus, I read Paul, and I begin to wonder and worry about whether we as followers of Jesus, as Christians, the church universal- Southern Baptist, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist and everything in between if we have really been proclaiming the good news of God in Jesus Christ through word and deed. That we are actually following the command of Jesus. I wonder about a Christianity that seems to be about imposing itself on others. Does that match what Jesus did and calls us to?

I wonder about a Christianity that is quick to embrace force, or violence to bring about conformity. Are these the tactics Jesus used? Are they ones he seems to endorse? If not, does this mean Jesus wasn't worried about such things? That he doesn't care about each life?

By no means! But it points us to the difference between what Paul calls the reign of the flesh and the Kingdom of God that we are to embody- the Kingdom of God has come near to you the disciples are to tell those who have been healed.

The reign of the flesh, the Kingdom of the world, Paul says is identifiable by these things; sexual immorality, worshipping other gods, hostilities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, and other wanton behavior. Behavior that Paul describes as biting and devouring one another. Does any of that sound familiar? Can you look around our world, even in your own lives and see this reign of the flesh at play? Paul's warning to the Galatians is one we should hear as well, "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." It is not a threat, but truth. If you engage in these things, the reign of God can't happen because all of those things are opposed to what those living in the Spirit do.

Instead, Paul describes what the Kingdom of God looks like. He uses the language of the fruit of the Spirit. First of which is love- the self-sacrificial love of our neighbors that is the true expression of Christian freedom. Joy- the root of the Greek word is the same as grace. Joy is delight in grace received and shared with others. Peace- the same peace that is wholeness, quietness, not the absence of conflict but the solidity and calmness that is the antidote to anger, strife, enmity. Patience- literally long suffering. It is anger and passion set aside to give us room to listen to others. Kindness- it has the implication of being useful or profitable, it is kindness that meets true needs. Generosity- literally goodness to others. Faithfulness- trust not in ourselves, but God and God's promises. Gentleness- not weakness, but literally gentle force. Might restrained. Self-control- the ability with the Holy Spirit's help to make those small daily choices to reflect the kingdom of God and not the reign of the flesh. That's what the Kingdom of God looks like. Sounds good, doesn't it?

I listen to the language some siblings in Christ use- militant, violent- even. I listen to condemnations and judgments about people's faithfulness thrown around. And I wonder, even if well intentioned, if these are really of the Kingdom of God. They certainly don't fit what Jesus tells his advance people to do and don't reflect how Jesus operates most of the time. Doesn't seem to fit even what Jesus and Paul suggest as the way to hold fellow believers accountable.

Boy they feel good, though, don't they? They give us the sense that we are fighting hard for the Kingdom of God. That we are so committed to the gospel we will force the good upon those who are too ignorant to know they need it. To fight for the very things we believe are essential. But, I wonder if this is not the

equivalent of the seventy rejoicing because they can cast out demons instead of rejoicing in the fact that God has shown grace to them. I wonder if this is less about Jesus and more about us.

Jesus could have established an earthly kingdom. Jesus could have used force to raise up an army and defeat the Romans. Some of his followers were armed, just ask the slave of the high priest who had his ear cut off. But Jesus never took that step. I cannot see in this text today or in any other text in the gospels where Jesus calls his followers to that.

Instead, Jesus calls us to love. Self-sacrificial love of neighbor. Jesus calls us to joy- delight in the grace of God we have received in our own lives. Delight in sharing that grace with others and seeing how it transforms them. Jesus calls us to peace and patience. To kindness and generosity. To attend to those we meet and if they don't hear, to state the truth, "The kingdom of God was here" and move on. Cause Jesus will follow up anyway. To rejoice always in what God has done for us- not in anything we think we can do.

As the Psalm says, we are joyful in God. We rejoice in the fact that God saves. We rejoice that in Jesus God came to us despite ourselves. That Jesus came not to judge us, but to save us. Came not to beat us down, but to lift us up. And this is what we are called to do and be.

People of the Spirit. Let us not grow weary of doing what is right- and slip into doing what is easy. Let us work for the good of all, bear one another's burdens.

Lord God, give us patience, to sit even in the face of another's anger, and listen to them. To hear the reality of their story and experience and bring your love into that life. So that they might experience the life changing grace that we have.

Lord God, root us in your love. Plant it deep in our hearts that we might spill that same self-sacrificial love onto all that we meet. Love that is the tap root of all the fruits of your Spirit at work in our lives. A love that is so different from the reign of this world that it can scare people. But a love that has already overcome the world.

Lord God, on this July 4th weekend, as we celebrate this nation we call home, remind us that we belong to you through your Son, Jesus. Fill our hearts, that we would rejoice as loudly and clearly that you have called us by name. And send us into this world not to condemn it, but to proclaim that your reign has come near, and to trust in the power of your Spirit to do the rest.

That your peace and mercy might reign not only in our lives, but our nation, and throughout the world. Amen.