

Scripture Reading for Sunday July 7th 2019

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 (NIV)

10 After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. ² He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. ³ Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. ⁴ Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. ⁵ “When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ ⁶ If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. ⁷ Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. ⁸ “When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. ⁹ Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ ¹⁰ But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, ¹¹ ‘Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God has come near.’ ¹⁶ “Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me.”

¹⁷ The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.”¹⁸ He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹ I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. ²⁰ However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Sermon: The Harvest Is Plentiful

The Nicene Creed proclaims, “We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” The “holy catholic” bit means the Church *universal*, the world-wide Church in all times and places, *not* the Roman Catholic Church. And “apostolic” comes from the Greek word meaning “*sent*.” The twelve Apostles were so-named because they were *sent* on a mission; *God’s* mission. But as our lectionary reading for today indicates, it wasn’t just those leaders who were responsible for spreading the good news. Luke tells us that on one occasion Jesus sent 72 ordinary followers, two-by-two, “ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.”¹

In the previous chapter we read of Jesus sending “the twelve” and he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons, to heal the sick, and to proclaim the kingdom of God - which they did.² So, what has changed? Why is Jesus now changing tactics and [apparently] now sending so many more, even though their mission was the same? There are several possible explanations, and all of them seem appropriate. First, at the end of the previous chapter, Luke tells us of a turning point in Christ’s mission, in that he has now resolutely set out for Jerusalem.³ As his popularity grew, so the potential of a

¹ Luke 10:1. Only Luke’s gospel reports this sending of the 72.

² Luke 9:1-2,6-7. Note that Jesus gave them similar instructions; see 9:3-5. (See also Matt 9:37–38; 10:7–16; Mark 6:7–13.)

³ Luke 9:51.

backlash from the Jewish establishment increased. Jesus knew that his time for ministry was limited; had already “predicted” his death twice.⁴ There was, therefore, a renewed sense of *urgency* to use the available opportunities well. By sending out the 72, he was not only training and empowering them, they were acting like forerunners preparing the way for Jesus while there was still time. Second, based on the list of Noah’s descendants in Genesis 10, the number of nations in the world was deemed to be 70. (Actually, based on the number in the *Hebrew Scriptures*, some Bible translations have 70 [NRSV] and others have 72 [NIV] - based on the number in the *Greek (LXX)* version.) Jesus being the *saviour of the world* is one of Luke’s key themes,⁵ and so this symbolic sending of the 72 also “foretells” the *ongoing* mission of the church that Luke later describes in the Book of Acts. Third, this commissioning also echoes Moses sharing the responsibility with 70 elders during the exodus in the wilderness.⁶ The implication is that Jesus is, therefore, creating a new community of followers – a new exodus – and Jesus is a new (authorized)⁷ Moses-figure. Taken all together, this sending of the 72 – or the 70 – is a powerful image and message in Jesus’ own ministry, for Luke’s readers, and in our own day. As the Nicene Creed makes clear, we are part of a *sent* and *sending* church, commissioned by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit.⁸

What does Jesus say as he commissions them? He begins with two proverbial metaphors. First, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”⁹ Isaiah speaks of the harvest as being all Israel; Luke re-interprets it to *all* [“whoever”] who hear and respond.¹⁰ Jesus proclaims the harvest¹¹ will be *abundant* – not sparse – it’s the number of *workers* who are few! This is a sobering thought when we consider the scarcity of church involvement or attendance today. Moreover, all farmers know that, at harvesttime, there is a sense of *urgency* to gather the crop in before it spoils or before the weather changes. That’s why the farmer needs extensive help in gather in the harvest; he can’t do it alone.¹² Jesus uses this image deliberately and enacts it in the sending of the 72. Second, while the potential for the harvest is great; gathering it in will not be an easy task. Jesus candidly tells them, “I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.”¹³ Implicit in this mission is that we go out vulnerable into a hostile world. We are called to share in the mission of Jesus with its joys and successes, but also alert to its dangers and risks.

Jesus then gives them directives in anticipation of both positive¹⁴ and negative¹⁵ responses, along with a series of instructions on entering houses. They are told to take nothing – no bag, no purse, or

⁴ Luke 9:21-22, 44-45.

⁵ See Luke 2:28-32; 24:47; Luke’s *readers*, therefore, understood this theme!

⁶ Num 11:16-17,24-25.

⁷ This also follows the Transfiguration in Luke 9:28-36, culminating with the divine command, “Listen to him” (9:35).

⁸ On the sending in pairs: according to Mosaic Law (Deut 19:15), two witnesses were required for a testimony to be credible.

⁹ Luke 10:2.

¹⁰ Isa 27:12; Luke 10:16,22. Again this resonates with Jesus as a Moses-like figure.

¹¹ This also signifies an *eschatological* harvest, as Jesus/Luke uses apocalyptic language in this section. (In Old Testament, the harvest is also a warning of judgement, see: Joel 3:13; Mic 4:11–13.)

¹² Nevertheless, the Lord of the harvest (God) takes ultimate responsibility for it.

¹³ Luke 10:3. (See also the eschatological vision in Isa 11:6; 65:25.)

¹⁴ Luke 10:5-9.

¹⁵ Luke 10:10-11.

sandals.¹⁶ All this underscores the sense of urgency and singleness of purpose. The instructions concerning houses seem strange to us because we don't share their cultural expectations when it comes to hospitality. In those days, it would be a cause of great shame for the people of the village *not* to show a warm welcome. But those being sent must *not* abuse that generosity, says Jesus. They must eat what is placed before them!¹⁷ They must not change houses in the village to one that is nicer!¹⁸ What is ultimately important is the message, not the messenger, the good news that God's reign is near.¹⁹ They are, therefore, to bless their hosts with peace: *shalom* – peace with God, each other, and demonstrate that with healings.²⁰ They are to do precisely what [their master] Jesus does! However, Jesus also predicts that not everyone will welcome them. When that happens, they are *not* to curse them,²¹ but to move on to another village.²²

Curiously, the lectionary skips over a section in verses 12-15 that's "uncomfortable" to our modern ears, one which gives *dire* warnings to those who reject the message. Jesus says we will be judged according to what we have had the chance to know.²³ This is summarized in verse 16: "Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me."²⁴ We need to appreciate Jesus is *not* being a bully here, but simply speaking as a *prophet* seeking to purify God's people in continuity with the Old Testament prophetic tradition. Oddly, people today struggle with Jesus being divine, yet are quite happy to call him a "prophet." But they don't expect him to behave like one! Israel, God's *chosen* people, were more privileged than everyone else, hence we hear a greater sense of divine judgement for those who are unrepentant or ignore the good news that God's kingdom is near. Jesus is *not* trying to condemn Judaism; he is trying to shake them loose from their contentment with the religious status quo. He is *not* trying to kill off the Mosaic covenant, but to embody it with new life and meaning.

What was the outcome of the mission of the 72? They returned in joy!²⁵ The followers also mark their success by the fact they had powers over demons.²⁶ At which point Jesus replies, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."²⁷ What does this mean? Jesus is telling them that there was much more going on behind the scenes than they imagined.²⁸ Jesus began his public career with a private battle against the real enemy during his temptations in the wilderness.²⁹ In the near future, during in the great last

¹⁶ Luke 9:3 also says: no staff, money, food, or extra clothes!

¹⁷ Luke 10:8. This will take on added significance in Acts 10 when Peter experiences the *non-Jewish* hospitality of Cornelius.

¹⁸ Luke 10:6-7.

¹⁹ Luke 10:9,11. Jurgen Moltmann says, "Who is Jesus? He is simply the kingdom of God in person."

²⁰ Luke 10:5,9.

²¹ See Luke 9:52-56. One cannot overlook that "blessing" and "cursing" is a well-understood Old Testament theme; Deut 11.

²² Luke 10:10-11.

²³ Luke 10:13-14.

²⁴ Luke 10:16. And it's a terrible thing to reject God's invitation.

²⁵ Luke 10:17. And this joy also foreshadows the joy that they would experience at the resurrection – Luke 24:41, 52.

²⁶ Luke 10:17b. This needs to be contrasted with their earlier experience in Luke 9:37-43.

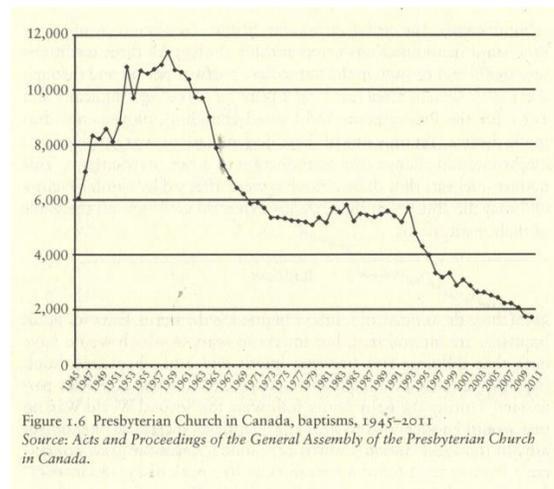
²⁷ Luke 10:18.

²⁸ There is an apocalyptic and eschatological element to this harvest, and this is made clear in the (Old Testament) imagery of Satan, scorpions, and snakes which all point to evil powers. This only adds to the sense of urgency for mission.

²⁹ Luke 4:1-13.

showdown of Easter week,³⁰ the battle over evil would eventually be won, paving the way to God’s new creation in which death itself would be banished forever. In the meantime, the outcome of Christ’s initial victory in the desert was not only being implemented through the effectiveness of his own ministry, but now through the work of his followers. In short, for Satan to be “cast out of heaven” means he has been defeated and his power broken.³¹ That defeat is also portrayed symbolically as power over serpents and scorpions, borrowing images of evil from prophetic and apocalyptic writings. Satan, then, is on his way out! He is defeated in principle, and even if this is not the end of all that evil, then at least it’s the beginning of the end and the beginning of God’s reign. Although Jesus has given this authority, he warns them that they shouldn’t just sit back now and enjoy these new “powers.” They are *not* now to merely bask in their success or have undue pride in their achievements. No, they can courageously continue in God’s mission in the knowledge that nothing will ultimately hurt them, not even death itself, because their names are “written in heaven.”³²

This is a challenging text for churches today. There is much to digest in this passage; I will only address part of it – that of being *sent*. *Who of you* wants to go out and do the harvesting? If we don’t go out and deliberately work to gather in the crop, we know it is ourselves who will eventually starve! This is a long overdue message for traditional churches - Anglican, United, Presbyterian, and Lutheran – in Canada, Britain and Europe, as illustrated by this graph of the decline of baptisms in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Our local Presbytery has closed a number of churches in the last decade and will likely close more in the next. Nevertheless, take heart; national averages and trends overlook local variations.³³



Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity* (2017) p50, 197-99.

Even so, we at St Andrew’s can’t afford to put our head in the sand and do nothing. In recent decades it has been widely recognized³⁴ that we traditional churches need to be reawakened to our sense of mission, of being sent, *confident* that we not only have “good news” to proclaim in words and deeds, but that the harvest *will be* “plentiful.” The church is *not* meant to be a religious social club! As Archbishop William Temple said, “The church is the only society that exists for the benefit of its non-

³⁰ Satan’s influence is made clear in Luke 22:3-6.

³¹ The apocalyptic imagery of serpents and scorpions appear as images for the power of evil in prophetic and apocalyptic writing (e.g., Isa 14:12-15).

³² Luke 10:20; see also Dan 12:1; Ps 69:28; Exo 32:32. See also Acts 2:21: “Those who call upon the Lord will be saved.”

³³ The non-conformist churches in Canada (e.g., Pentecostal, etc.) don’t show such a dramatic loss. But neither are they growing - but plateauing (or in slow decline) - in contrast to some popular perceptions. See Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 109, 197-99.

³⁴ For example: “The present reality of alienation, brokenness, and injustice demonstrates the gap and tension between our contemporary world and the fullness of the reign of God.” D. L. Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 162. The Church is to embody a viable alternative and so “live in the midst of history as a sign, instrument and foretaste of the reign of God.” L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 110.

members.” And as Swiss Reformed theologian, Emil Brunner said, “The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission there is no church.” The Church’s *essence* is therefore *missional*; we are meant to be an *apostolic* – or sent – church that *re-presents* Christ to others in every generation. Congregations can often spend too much time, understandable though that is, caring for their internal own that we forget that we, like the 72 ordinary followers of Jesus, have been sent *out* with the gospel of God’s love of justice and mercy. Like the Jews in the 1st century, this “good news” is been entrusted to us to share with everybody, *not* kept to ourselves. How can we get out of the pews and join in God’s mission to the world? That will look different in every local church; there is *no* magic recipe for guaranteed success.

First, we have here at St Andrew’s a positive sense of “belonging” that others may wish to participate in, if only they knew about it. That’s a very important start. Yet building on that, it doesn’t matter whether we are introverts or extroverts, we also need – both individually and collectively - to have confidence in *what* we believe and have *our own stories* of God making a difference in our lives that we are willing to share – and those stories need *not* be dramatic, in fact, ordinary is usually better! This provides a vital foundation of which we must not be shy or embarrassed.³⁵ Second, never forget that we are sent to give blessing [*shalom* - peace], *not* to pronounce judgement! Third, while there is intentionality to mission, the growth will be *organic* and in God’s good timing! It is *not* to be conducted, nor its success measured, after the manner of a military operation or a sales campaign. In this context we should note that, earlier in Luke, Jesus told the farming parable of the Sower.³⁶ Just as in the varied response of the 72, some sown seed will be unproductive; others will thrive. That aspect is not really our problem, but God’s! Much depends on the local context and needs, our passion, commitment, networks, talents, and the Spirit’s enabling work among us. Risks will need to be taken, and since resources and time are finite, we must know when to let go and move on. We must *not*, however, lose hope or be anxious over disappointments or [seeming] failure, for the harvest – says Jesus – will be, in the end, plentiful! Fourth, our primary focus is really *not* growing the institutional Church but about bringing and embodying the reign of God in compassion, hospitality, community, justice and peace.³⁷ However sophisticated we may think we are, our society still needs those things.

As I conclude, be encouraged by this account of the 72 and their joyful success. Hear, too, the wise and powerful words of Lesslie Newbigin: “Mission is not just something that the Church does; it is something done by the Spirit, who himself is the witness, who *changes* both the world and the Church, who always goes *before* the Church on its missionary journey.”³⁸ That is certainly what the 72 experienced and I believe God’s Spirit still works the same way today. Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” The situation is urgent and the time is now; who wants to go out and do the harvesting? Let us pray.

³⁵ The early church in Acts were known for prayer, hospitality, friendship, and adhering to the apostle’s teaching; Acts 2:42.

³⁶ Luke 8:4-15.

³⁷ This is a sober thought in our post-Christendom context, as many view evangelism as a means of *refilling* the church. And we stop mission when the church is full, or else we build a bigger *building*! Mission is (eschatological) “hope in action.”

³⁸ “The Church, then, lives in the midst of history as a sign, instrument and foretaste of the reign of God,” says Newbigin.