

"The kingdom of God has come near you...."
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, July 7, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Aft this [just prior to this passage, Jesus has said to would be disciples, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Lk 9:62)], the Lord appointed seventy [other translations say seventy-two] others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first 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. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near'.... Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

The seventy [or seventy-two] returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightening. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Will you pray with me. Commanding God, you call us to your kingdom and we sometimes say, "No thanks. I'm busy." Help us to hear Jesus calling to us this day in new ways so that we might know your kingdom with new understanding and even greater commitment as disciples of your Word. Amen.

I have a confession to make this morning. My confession is this -- when two of Jesus' disciples come to my door, usually members of either the Jehovah's Witness Fellowship or the Mormon Church, I pretend I'm not home. Or if I don't realize who it is before I respond to the knock on the door, I simply say "No thank you" to their requests to come in so they can talk to me about Jesus Christ.

And to carry my confession further, if anyone asks me if I've accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior today, I say something along the lines of, "I'll think about that. Don't call me, I'll call you." Stating my confession in another way, I don't like people getting in my face about Jesus! It makes me nervous. I find it annoying. And I get feisty very quickly.

So hearing all of this confession, you must know that our Gospel reading from Luke today makes me squirmy. Luke and Jesus are talking about commissioning the kind of actions in people who irritate me! My guess is that some of you feel somewhat the same way -- although many of you may be more kind in your words and hospitality than I am when uninvited disciples of Jesus show up on my front doorstep.

My guess is many of us have chosen to be a part of this particular congregation and the United Church of Christ or the United Methodist Church because we don't want to be in other

people's faces about Jesus. We don't want to *talk* about Jesus to others so much as we want to do our best to *be like* Jesus toward them. We don't want to *spread* the Gospel, we want to *live out* the Gospel. Am I right?

So why did I choose this reading from the lectionary for this week, when there were three other perfectly good readings we could have explored? My reason is this -- sometimes it's good to think about situations and people we'd rather not think about. I try to convince myself that it builds character, and just maybe in the process, we, I, will grow in faith and understanding of what it means to be a Christian in today's world.

It seems to me there are two ways to approach our reading from Luke for today. First, we can think about those seventy (or seventy--two depending on which translation you read) individuals whom Jesus called and sent out to deliver his message and prepare the way before him. We can go over the instructions he gives them about what they are to take with them and not take with them, what they are to do and not do along their way, how they are to respond to those they meet and stay with, and how they are to reject those who do not welcome them. We can talk about how we are like, or not like, those first seventy, or seventy-two, draftees, or disciples, of Jesus.

That would be a good and important approach to take to this passage. We could benefit from thinking about how we are prepared and not prepared, willing and not willing, to live out the commissioning of Jesus to his disciples. I can only speak for myself, of course, but I know there are things I'll do, and things I won't do for Jesus. I could make a list of each, and I'm willing to bet you could, too. That would call for a whole lot of soul searching, though, and our willingness to point out some of our worst failings. It certainly would for me. And for today, I think I've done enough confessing of my less than hospitable nature towards our more zealous Christian brothers and sisters.

The second way we can approach our reading from Luke for today is to focus on what Jesus tells these first disciples to say to people when they meet with them. He says, "Whatever house you enter, first 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." (Lk 10:5-6) And, "Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'" (Lk 10:8-11)

Makes me wonder if the twosomes who have shown up on my front porch at various times wanting to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to me, from their perspective, have gone away wiping the dust of me from their feet and saying under their breaths, "The kingdom of God has come near her, and she doesn't even want to hear about it." I have to tell you, this passage from Luke makes me think about my high and mighty, seven-years-of-seminary doctoral theology and wonder if I've missed something along the way.

The kingdom of God has come near us. Have we noticed?

"There is clear agreement among the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke that *the kingdom of God* was the principal theme within Jesus' message. Matthew 4:17 says, "From that time [when Jesus began his ministry in Galilee] he began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" Verse 23 says, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news [the gospel] of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."

Mark 1:15 says, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'"

Luke 4:42 begins, "At daybreak Jesus departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. But he said to them, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.'" (Lk 4:42-43)

In [total number], the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke present some fifty sayings and parables of Jesus concerning the kingdom of [God]."¹

Jesus stood on a lot of front porches in his one to three years of ministry. I wonder how many people turned *him* away from their door, as I have turned away those who would proclaim his message on *my* front porch? I'm not proud of this, and I can't deny it.

The kingdom of God has come near us. Have we noticed?

But Jesus was a bright fellow. He knew, perhaps because God helped him to understand, that people learn things in different ways. Some appreciate the direct approach and will respond positively to someone saying to them, "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior today?" Others of us, me for example, only open our eyes and our minds and our hearts to more subtle, nuanced ways of explaining and describing the kingdom of God.

"Many of Jesus' parables are told in order to help his hearers grasp his concept of God's rule. They range in scope from stories which have their origin in peasant customs to stories of kings and landowners. They present the kingdom [of God] as a treasure beyond price, a magnificent banquet, or a wedding feast. Even the parables of Jesus which do not seem to have a surface connection to the kingdom address the need for proper behavior and relationships in the light of the coming of God's kingdom."²

Next week we will focus on the parable of the Good Samaritan. If there was ever a visual and active and emotive picture of the kingdom of God, it is in the behavior of the "good Samaritan," and in Jesus' answer to the lawyer's inquiry about what he must do to inherit eternal life -- just as it is written in Jewish law -- "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Lk 10:25-27) And after he tells the story of the Good Samaritan to the lawyer, Jesus says to him, "Go and do likewise." (Lk 10:37)

The kingdom of God has come near. Have we noticed? Let us receive the Lord's Supper and then go and spread the word of the kingdom in whatever form suits each of us in *this* body of Christ.

Let the people say, "Amen."

¹From *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 1993, p. 408.

²From *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 2000, p. 768.