

A People Sent

Luke 10: 1-20

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 8th July 2007

Dallas Willard (b.1935) taught philosophy for many years at the University of Wisconsin and UCLA, and written extensively about the Christian life, tells of his experience as a young boy when “rural electrification was taking place throughout the United States. For the first time ever, tall poles popped up across the landscape of the countryside with huge electric wires strung from pole to pole to pole. But initially, at least, not everyone trusted electricity and so not a few rural families opted (for a time) to not hook up. They heard the messages of the electric company of how much easier life would be with electric washing machines replacing hand-cranked wringers and electric vacuum cleaners bringing to an end the old practice of hauling heavy carpets outside to have dirt beaten out of them. They heard these promises but did not trust or believe them. You could have said to these folks, ‘My friends, electricity is at hand!’” But if they opted to not tap into that power that was running right over their heads, then the nearness of the power would do them no good.”¹ But that didn’t change the fact that the electricity was there, ready for them, if only they tapped into it and received it.

This is like the time Jesus sent his “electricians” out to prepare the way, these evangelists, these proclaimers of God’s power. “Go ahead, hurry, don’t even stop to greet one another, there’s no time for empty chit-chat, tell the people, show them, whether they think they need it or not, whether they trust the message or the messenger or not, *go say, show*, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” “When you go into the towns and the people welcome you, eat what is set before you, cure the sick who are there, and say, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ And if the people reject you, if they are not open to God’s good news, wipe the dust of their town from your feet and move on, but before you go say, ‘Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near to you.’” Whether open to the message or not, whether open to God’s good news or not, the reality is there all the same: *The kingdom of God has come near to you.*

But woe to that town, that church, that person is who not open to what God is giving, who fails to have a spirit of hospitality toward the presence of the kingdom, who misses what God is showing. Of that situation it would be said that Sodom had it

¹ Center for Excellence in Preaching: <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php> (accessed 3 July 2007).

easy. Harsh words, to be sure. Why does Jesus mention Sodom? Because the sin of Sodom was inhospitality; like Gomorrah, these are communities that did not welcome the stranger, the guest who was coming in the name of the Lord.²

For these communities, the guest is the message, the demonstration of God's kingdom breaking into the world through Jesus Christ. For the places of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum – communities that form a triangle, about three miles apart from each other on the north shore of Sea of Galilee – places near and dear to Jesus' heart, where he lived and taught, even these places would not welcome the message. So the word of judgment comes. The lectionary reading bypasses these harsh words, skipping verses 12-15. We prefer to see Jesus as the nice guy, but there is judgment here. There's judgment here, not because Jesus is trying to make our lives difficult, but because this is serious, urgent business, not to be taken lightly. There's so much at stake here. There's a lot riding on the reception of this message. If they are not open to the message, then move on, because others will. What matters most is the message, demonstrating the good news, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." Jesus selects these 70 or 72 nameless "others," entrusts them with this important responsibility and then sends them out in twos on the mission of a lifetime.

And the message is the kingdom of God, that's the Main Event. The message is not Jesus *per se*, (this probably sounds shocking), but *God*, with Jesus as the servant of Yahweh who was sent into the world to embody the message of God. And what did God send Jesus to convey to the world? It's found in Luke 4: There's good news for the poor, release for all held captive, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed. The timeless year of jubilee, of Yahweh's favor toward the world has begun. It's found in Luke 2. This is why Jesus was sent: To banish fear and offer good news "of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace among those whom he favors!" These seventy-plus are sent out to demonstrate the rule of God, just like Jesus. And so they go.

When they return to Jesus with their reports, not discouraged but "with joy," they couldn't believe their eyes, they couldn't believe what happened. They were surprised by the power available to them, of the power *within* them. Authority had been given to them by the Lord and with that authority they were equipped to deal with every enemy of God's kingdom. Maybe that's why Jesus said, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lighting." There is no power that has ultimate power

² Cf. Genesis 18 & 19. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 162-176. See also Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 92-93.

over God's people. The future belongs to God and God's kingdom, so do not fear. Perhaps, "Satan cannot match the creativity of those who are faithful to the future that God envisages for the good earth and its inhabitants"?³ The power and authority of God's rule over heaven and earth is embodied in Jesus and those whom he sends out to do his ministry, who seek to be servants of this same kingdom.

If you haven't picked this up by now, the folks he sends out to this ministry, to serve the kingdom, is the *church*. The text doesn't mention the church, but that's Luke's audience. He's writing to a group of people nameless to us and thoroughly unqualified, yet called by the Lord and sent. Luke's talking to us, saying, "Here, look, this is what it's like with the Lord, this is what he does." And, "Here, look, here's what a church is supposed to look like, this is what it does, this is how it behaves, this is how it works." He's not saying Christians are to be penniless, owning nothing, and barefoot. And some Christians have tried to play with scorpions and snakes in Jesus' name, perhaps with great skill. But these things have done little to advance the kingdom – and it's all about the kingdom. The church exists as a community that is *scattered*. When you leave here you are you are the church scattered and *sent* to proclaim, share, and embody God's kingdom, and then returns to share the joy, only to be sent back out again.

I'm intentionally using this word "sent" a lot because it's theologically significant. Contemporary biblical scholars and theologians are beginning to look at scripture with fresh eyes and discovering that from the opening pages of Genesis right through to Revelation, Yahweh is a sending God, never in one place, but always on the move.⁴ The theological word for being sent is "mission," it means to be sent. Almost every character of significance in the Bible is a man or woman on a mission, sent to be a servant, or prophet, or messenger of God's mission to redeem Israel and the world. God's mission, this *missio Dei*, the mission of God directs history and leads us to the *sending* of his Son, Jesus, who *sends* the Holy Spirit, who, together, *sends* people out to

³ The comment of Bruce Epperly on the Process and Faith website:
<http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2006-2007/2007-07-08.shtml> (accessed 3 July 2007).

⁴ See the influential book that in many ways signals this critical shift in thinking about mission, David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), first published in 1991. Others significant works on the missional church movement include: James V. Brownson, Inagrace T. Dietterich, Barry A. Harvey, Charles C. West, eds., *Storm Front: The Good News of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Hendrickson, 2006); Darrell L. Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

preach and get caught up in the mission of God. Christians are a people sent, a people on the move – and if we’re not, then we’re not about the kingdom’s work.

By mission we don’t mean the work of just the Mission Committee, but every aspect of this ministry, the work of the trustees, deacons, and elders together, every committee, board, and program, every activity, and every member aligned with our overall mission. Maybe we need to change the name of our Mission Committee to prevent this confusion. *Everything we do is part of our mission, and the mission of the church is the mission of God.* This means the mission or purpose of this or any church cannot ultimately be self-directed, focused in on itself, upon the building and the preservation of the institution for another generation, and growth merely for the sake of growing the church. The building and the institution, the entire church exists for one purpose, it’s what we were baptized into and what we signed on for when we said we would follow Jesus – *to do God’s mission.* The church in our age cannot afford to be inward focused or attractional – that is, we don’t exist simply to bring people to become members of a church, where outreach is little more than inreach.⁵ Like the kingdom of God, we need to turn this image inside out. It’s the other way around. *The church is a people sent out to make obvious God’s redemptive and healing love in the world and among all of God’s people, inviting everyone to join our work.* Everyone here has witnessed this grace and healing and so we are sent out to be witnesses of it in the world. If folks aren’t open to it, then wipe the dust off your feet and move on. The kingdom is still coming near them, nevertheless. If they are open to it, fine, invite them to return here with the joy of the Lord to become part of this work. But then, through the joy of the Lord, we are called to go out – like the seventy.

But who are these people? We know about the twelve disciples, but who are these 70-plus people, where did they come from? What happened to them after they returned? They’re never heard from again. And if what they’re doing is so important, then why does Jesus send them out so ill-equipped, without even a guidebook? There’s no how-to manual, no extensive educational conditioning, no degree required. There are no exceptional qualifications. What kind of criteria does Jesus have for this kind of work? There’s no list of distinguishing character traits, virtues, graces, gifts, or talents. It’s not gender specific, class or race or anything specific. In fact, there are no requirements for “ordination” or commissioning to this task other than being called by the Lord and then going. This isn’t easy work, either. Jesus knows he’s sending them “like lambs into the midst of wolves,” he knows it’s rough out there. Yet, he’s sending them without a safety net – no purse, no bag, no sandals, nothing to depend upon. It’s

⁵ See Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006). He also reinforces the point that “The early church was an organic *missional* movement, not a religious institution,” 252.

like an evangelical Outward Bound expedition or an episode of evangelical Survivor. And there's no guaranteed funding, no budget. If this is so serious and important, then why does Jesus entrust these nameless others with this responsibility, without a structure or even a committee in place to organize and manage the experience?

Who are these people sent out by Jesus, entrusted with this task? We don't know. But why does God ever trust anyone with the message of the kingdom? And yet, God does precisely this. He *trusts* them with the message. God actually trusts us with this message.

God trusts us. Every one of us is qualified for this work. Every resource we need for effective ministry in this congregation is already within us –within our hearts and minds and wallets. The way we discover them is by using them, spending them. Not in here, where it's safe, but out there as lambs among wolves. It's out there we discover what's in us. *There's more power at work in us in every one of us, more than we could ever imagine.* The more you act, the more you discover what God is doing through you, the more real it becomes. And to encourage us, so we don't feel overwhelmed and alone Jesus sends us out in teams, two together. Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), the patron saint of Italy, once said, "The only ones who are afraid are those who think they are alone."⁶ Ministry is never done alone, but done together and done by everyone.

But who are these nameless disciples? I don't know, but maybe they're you and me. Every man, every woman, every child, every anonymous, nameless person who in his or her own way display and make obvious on a daily basis that "the kingdom of God has come near." Isn't this how ministry usually happens, anonymously? Not by famous Super-Christians or televangelists, but by ordinary people whom time will forget, but not God, who quietly, secretly serve *incognito*, stealth disciples who operate under anyone's radar, yet effectively embody the kingdom.

Just think of mission workers worldwide who have given decades of their lives in service. We cannot even begin to imagine all that is being done every day in God's name. Most of it goes unnoticed. Think of pastors serving small or rural churches in places no one has ever heard of.

Or think of the nameless lay men and women who embody the kingdom not for fame, but in love:

⁶ Catherine of Siena, *Catherine of Siena: Passion for the Truth, Compassion for Humanity: Selected Spiritual Writings*, ed. Mary O'Discoll (New York: New City, 1993), 97, cited in Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion* (Waterbrook Press, 200&), 139.

- People who are hospitable and welcoming, people of humility, kindness, and grace.
- People who provide food and fellowship at a shelter.
- Those who offer time and sweat-equity working on a building project, or sort through food at the food bank.
- The person who drives a friend for her chemotherapy treatments.
- The person who provides *pro bono* legal service.
- Think of the person who listens non-judgmentally over a cup of coffee at Starbucks.
- The person who rushes to the hospital at two in the morning to sit at the bedside of a friend in the last few minutes of life.
- The one who writes a note of sympathy, appreciation, and understanding.
- The person who rejoices with those who rejoice and suffers with those who suffer.
- The one who can cry with those who are crying and laugh when those are laughing – or get you to laugh when you feel like crying.
- The person who helps to carry your burden.

Such is the anonymous power at work, just a few of the “deeds of power,” electric power at work in *this* congregation. I haven’t seen anyone treading on scorpions or snakes around here yet – and not sure I would know what to say if I did. However, I have no doubt regarding the kind of power at work in and through this congregation. And for that, *thanks be to God!*

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