

Sermon: **Faithful Presence**

Text: Luke 10:1-9

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Harpswell, Maine  
Delivered July 4, 2010

“Go on your way”, Jesus says to the 70 as he sends them out into the world as witnesses of the Good News of the Kingdom.

What he says to them next is surprising, and not a little troubling to any 21<sup>st</sup> century traveler. He seems to send them out so unequipped. Of course, they didn't have Triple-A memberships or credit cards and they weren't able to make advance reservations at motels along the way. It's true that travel and hospitality was entirely different than today. None-the-less, Jesus instructions seem quite stark.

I don't think his instructions to the 70 should be applied in a literal way for us today, but I do think he speaks some very important principled instruction that has important implication for our Christian life and ministry.

Jesus sent them out essentially to be a faithful presence of Jesus Christ in their world then. And Jesus sends us out essentially to be a faithful presence of Jesus Christ in our world today.

He doesn't work them through a series of strategic planning sessions. He doesn't set them up with a bundle of resources. He doesn't outline a sales pitch.

“Go on your way. Now, I'm sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.” They were to go peacefully and relationally and respectfully; not armed for battle, but as lambs, even as Jesus the Lamb, had come to give himself sacrificially.

Rather than loading them down with all kinds of provisions and resources, he was telling them to divest themselves of everything but his Spirit with them, even as Jesus had emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant.

In short, they were to go in vulnerability and in dependence. They were to go in Jesus' name, in his strength and in his likeness.

Luke tells us that Jesus was sending them on ahead of him. We are *sent* into the world in Jesus name. We do not go on our own initiative. We are not religious entrepreneurialists breaking new ground. We are sent into the world by Jesus as witnesses of the power of his love and grace in our lives, sharing the Good News of his Kingdom. Our role is to be a witness of Jesus Christ by our words of testimony and our lives of Christ-likeness.

In our good desire and efforts to influence others, I'm afraid we often over-reach, trying to force Jesus on people. But the burden of persuasion is not on us, because we are not the focus. When it comes to sharing Christ's love and spreading the Good News, we can't force receptivity. Pushy argument doesn't win anything.

When I was in seminary, a huge debate that raged among the academics in the universities and seminaries and church leaders. It was about the authority and role of Holy Scripture, an important issue indeed. But the discussion went beyond contentious to rancorous. Finally there was a big show-down debate that took place (if I recall properly) at the University of Chicago Divinity School. John Warwick Montgomery, a very outspoken apologist and a skilled debater represented the conservative side of the debate. He is said to have won the debate. But as the newspaper reported, “Montgomery wins debate: loses audience.” I'll never forget that.

Winning the argument is not our purpose. Living a Christ-like lives is. Recall how the prophet put it, “Not by power nor by might, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.”

Jesus says, “No purse, no bag, no sandals.” But ordinary people, vulnerable, traveling light, completely dependent, not resentful or retaliatory in the face of misunderstanding and rejection by others. They are sent to live out the truth and reality of Jesus Christ in flesh and blood.

That’s God’s method. We are God’s method of ministry in the world.

My sermon title, “Faithful Presence” is borrowed from James Davison Hunter, professor of Religion, Culture and Social Theory at the University of Virginia. He has written a number of books about the moral tone of American life, especially in times of political and cultural change. He talks about how we can best be engaged in the world as Christians. I repeat, *as Christians*.

He laments, and I with him, that the public witness of the Church in our country has become too much of a contest; immersed in what has been dubbed “the culture wars”. We have the “religious right” and the “religious left” squared off against each other; conservatives and liberals, each contending to win this “war”. They get caught up in citing their grievances against each other. Each side seems to be motivated by a determination to win; by a will to power; and an effort to eventually dominate the culture. The whole thing has become increasingly fueled by resentment, misrepresentation, and cynicism.

Let me say it this way: The truth of Jesus Christ is not to be solved by argument. Rather the reality of Jesus Christ is to be born out in our living. When will we ever learn?

Now, Hunter is not against ideas, networks, technologies, institutions, nor is he contrary to proper involvement in political action and social reform. It’s just that these are not the essence of the Christian’s cultural engagement. He offers instead, what he calls “faithful presence. By that he means, “an expression of a desire to honor the creator of all goodness, beauty, and truth; a manifestation of our loving obedience to God; and a fulfillment of God’s command to love our neighbor.”

This expression, this manifestation, this fulfillment, comes by serving faithfully in our relationships, tasks, and spheres of social influence, as Christians; as individual Christian people, and as the community of Christ in the town and in the world.

That is so simple and so powerful.

As I near retirement I find myself coming back to and identifying more and more with a statement by Fred Craddock. You’ve heard me quote it before, and I expect you’ll hear it again, because I think it captures so simply and so powerfully what Jesus is saying to the 70, and what I’m trying to say to you. He says:

*When I was in my late teens, I wanted to be a preacher. When I was in my late twenties, I wanted to be a great preacher. Now that I’m older, I want more than anything else to be a Christian. To live simply, to love generously, to speak truthfully, to serve faithfully, and leave everything else to God.*

That may sound a bit simplistic to some, but it’s the essence of what it is to live the Christian life of faith. May it be the essence of our lives.

Amen.