

July 7, 2019**Two-way blessing****Year C**

I am usually a light packer, but that means starting to pack days before the trip, lots of planning, and taking things out as I realize I can get along without them. If I'm flying, I limit myself to one bag and a tote for my laptop. Even so, some of the things that usually make the final cut for a 10-day trip are one jacket (you never know when it might rain or turn chilly), one sweater, two pairs of pants, one dress, three or four shirts, toiletries in tiny bottles.

After this the Lord appointed seventy 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.’

Jesus wants the seventy to take far less, as in nothing—no money, no anything—just what they happen to be wearing. They are to be dependent on the kindness of strangers.

Hmmm. My control issues are a little strong for that. I’d probably at least stuff some underwear and shampoo into my pockets and hope he wouldn’t notice.

These followers are sent out as lambs among wolves; they will find out just who their friends are. Their friends are the ones who will welcome them, whether they are known to each other or not.

The disciples are to enter a home and declare peace to those who inhabit it. And even though in ancient Palestine hospitality is highly valued, not everyone will welcome those who bring peace. There are some homes and some communities in which peace is rejected because it may mean giving up power over others or may be perceived as

weakness. If the residents are not willing to hear the words of peace, then the disciples will move on to some other place where peace is welcomed.

Jesus tells the seventy to receive whatever hospitality is offered. That's odd. We expect to be told to share hospitality, not to receive it. How happy we are when someone thanks us for a nice meal or is grateful to have a place to stay. When the worshiping community extends hospitality to the stranger, the person on the margins, the immigrant, that community finds itself warmed and renewed by the act of giving.

And yet, receiving is also a gift to oneself and to the giver. Jesus knew what he was doing when he sent out the seventy in twos. We don't have to go to a foreign country to be on the journey together. We share memories and adventures. Sometimes we remember the wolves, and can laugh together at the ones who were mean but not really dangerous. We encourage each other to watch out for the truly alarming. But mostly, we talk about those lovely situations where we were given incredible hospitality, where we were welcomed. Sometimes it is hard for us to

accept those gifts of hospitality, for we have been trained to give rather than to receive. But Jesus wanted the seventy to know the joy of receiving.

The invitation and packing directions for Jesus' mission trip in Luke 10 promise an odd combination of experiences. What can we infer we'll be doing and not doing by them? What should we bring? What should we wear?

You're going to be working very hard because it's a big job and not enough people have signed up. You're going to meet people who will be hostile to your efforts and you're going to be in situations where you will experience rejection. You are to drastically under pack. Apparently, you are not going to need any luggage whatsoever. This is a stumper. Why not? The instructions don't say. Is it because you'll be washing your clothes frequently or borrowing clothes from your hosts?

You are not to take snacks because you'll be mooching off the people you stay with. Or, put more delicately, you'll be relying on the hospitality of the people you stay with to provide you with food.

These instructions on what to pack and what to leave at home clue us into the purpose of this mission trip. We are to be representatives of Jesus, announcing the advent of the kingdom of God. Given that purpose, you are to leave all the unnecessary stuff at home but be sure to take along your faith and your courage.

Jesus' reply in 10:18 expresses the power of his name over the demons. When he says he "saw" Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning, he is using the mythological idea of the fall and defeat of Satan to express the significance of the exorcisms. They are a sign of the defeat of Satan. The defeat of Satan is taking place in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples.

Then Jesus says, "See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpion, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will hurt you'. This is not a literal promise that you can handle snakes and not be susceptible to their venom. It actually makes a much more powerful promise: that, even in the face of the violence and injustice of life, evil cannot destroy the one who goes forth in Jesus' name.

And so I have found myself thinking about partners in mission and ministry in a very concrete way last week. Here is what I have observed so far: When the need is urgent, and it surely is, people respond. Even if we are too busy. When we can discern a common mission --- even across our many differences --- people respond to the call to come together.

I have also found this to be true: This is hard work. We don't all speak a common language --- not even those of us who call ourselves Christian --- even though for the most part we come from decidedly mainline churches. Perhaps because we do not know each other well and because the stakes are so high, we find ourselves needing to work hard to listen well enough that we understand each other.

And yet, that is the whole point, isn't it? Isn't it precisely the opposite of the willingness to do this hard work which has us stumbling around? Oh yes, it is hard work to try to understand one another and to find our common voice and it is surely something we should have been about a long time ago. And yet, we are finding it is not impossible.

There is so very much before us in today's Gospel lesson from Luke. I am settling in with Jesus having sent the disciples out in pairs. Without a doubt, this partnering was done for their own protection and for companionship. And yet, in these last days I am starting to wonder about how those partners were not only gifted but were also a challenge to one another. Indeed, without a doubt, it was their mutual need and their common mission which held them together.

Even so, I imagine along the way there were animated conversations shared: about which house seemed most likely to provide for their needs and which one or ones they ought to just bypass; about who was going to heal the sick this time and who would offer simple words of peace; about when and where it was appropriate to wipe the feet off in protest.

For aren't we always both strength and check to one another? How very much we need each other as we seek to meet this world God loves with God's peace and promise that the kingdom is, in fact, near!

Yet Jesus urges us on: The harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few. In this gospel Jesus tells us that our faith is not a private matter. We

are meant to proclaim it in word and deed. In the face of persecution, to be a Christian is not to slink through life in a defensive crouch. We are here to build God's kingdom, not bury it in our hearts. That's not empty, tough talk. There is no bluster or bravado in Jesus. There is no macho in his message. In this gospel Jesus does not order us to mandatory persecution. At the same time denying Christ is not an option and neither is revenge.

Jesus is telling us that love among the lambs is easy. Love among the wolves is hard. So what to do? The love of Christ is all we have. But it is more than enough, if we work at it every day. He calls us to make a simple one-on-one transaction. When hated, we love. When insulted, we love. When slandered, we love. That is what Christians do. We love the persecuted and the persecutors. Each one of us is the custodian of Christ's love. We live in it. We build it. We must share it... with the lambs and with the wolves. That's why we are here.

God love you! And so do I!