

There is so much here in our Gospel text for today that I think the best way to get at it is just take it little by little and see what we see.

It starts out by saying, **“After this...”** Well, right there I know I gotta go look up what this is after. And, thank you lectionary, it turns out this is the passage right after the one we read last week which was all about all the would-be followers of Jesus who, when Jesus said, “Come, follow me” found all kinds of excuses – I mean, reasons – not to come and follow him. They had to go take care of family business, or it was going to be a hassle, or whatever. It didn’t take much for folks to decide following Jesus and being part of the Kingdom of God was not for them. But, clearly, some did follow Jesus. Some did decide they wanted to be part of whatever it was that Jesus was doing such that then the text says,

**After this the Lord appointed seventy others.** Now, right off the bat we should note that the number is 70. that is probably more a meaning number than an actual number. In the world of the Bible numbers had meanings. The number 10 meant “lots,” and the number 7 meant completeness, the fullness of things. So it might or might not have been actually 70 followers. But however many there were they were plenty, exactly what was needed for the job. This makes me think of what so often happens when a congregation plans a project or an event. Especially if the congregation is an established, older congregation inevitably somebody looks around at the folks who have assembled to take part, and they observe how there aren’t enough people there, or at least not as many as there were back in the day. Arrrgghhh.

It is the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the Church. It is the Holy Spirit’s job to get the people here who are needed to do the work the Church is called to do. So step one for us is to quit complaining about who is not here. It insults the Holy Spirit and annoys the people who do show up. And step two is to remember what we are called and gathered to do. So many churches these days act like they are called to be like they were 20 or 40 or even 60 years ago. Newsflash: we Christians are not called to preserve some fondly-remembered version of the Church. We are called to proclaim the Gospel. We are called to proclaim God’s love for all people – with our words and our actions. That’s all. And anything else runs the risk of getting in our way of (to use Lake Edge Lutheran words) daring to embody the Gospel.

**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.**

Before Christianity was a rich and powerful religion, before it was associated with buildings, budgets, crusades, colonialism, or televangelism, it began as a revolutionary nonviolent movement promoting a new kind of aliveness on the margins of society.

Brian McLaren

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This text has traditionally been used as an evangelism text – or at least it has in my experience in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It goes along with a pretty particular version of evangelism which included things like knocking on doors to invite people to your church, with an underpinning of an expectation about coming to believe in the salvation in Jesus so you go to heaven when you die. I'm pretty sure that is not even close to what the author of this text was talking about.

If you have been by my office you know that in the center there is a quote by Richard Rohr that says, basically, that before the church was about buildings and memberships and programs, and budgets it was a counter-cultural movement about radical caring and welcome in Jesus' name and finding a new kind of life in that shared community and commitment. Part of following Jesus was letting go of society's hold on you and then living into trying to live out self-giving love. What might "fields white unto harvest" meant for those early followers? I think it was not that different from today. There were people who were lost or alone and had no one to care for them. There were people who were suffering and were in need of healing. There were people whose lives and relationships were broken and there needed to be forgiveness and reconciliation. There were people who were exploited and oppressed and needed someone to stand up for them. If that was the case, the fields are as ready for harvest as they have ever, ever been.

I love that Jesus says, "Go on your way." It does not get any more explicit than that. Following Jesus is not just about sitting around and listening to Jesus preach and teach. Living out our faith is not about being Jesus-groupies. It is about action. There comes a point when we don't need to read yet another book. We don't need to go to another conference. We need to do a sit-in at some Congress critter's door. Or we need to organize and boycott the companies getting rich off of incarceration. It's time to get up off our duffs and "go our on 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.'**

Just three things to notice here: 1) That lambs into midst of wolves bit. We are not going on a picnic. Following Jesus well has always, always, always gotten people in trouble with those who are captive to the sinfulness of the world, to its systems of evil. Those

who are doing the best in the present system are sometimes the most captive to it. That's us, by the way. It's not for nothing that we so often say, "we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves." We are reminding ourselves that we are freed to follow. 2) We need to travel light. I'm still part of the generation that lived with people who survived the Great Depression. I save things. Too many things. I'm beginning to think of it as ballast. It weighs me down. I think too often it keeps me from getting on my way. And 3) Make do with what is provided. This following Jesus is not a "get rich quick" scheme. We are not in this to enrich ourselves or be picky about when and where and how we serve God. We serve God, we care for the needs of the world wherever we are. Why? So that there can be healing. So that the good news of God's ways of love can be proclaimed. We live in a time of such cynicism and despair. People are hungering for a word of hope. By our loving we live out that hope. Our very lives become examples of what God is still up to in the world.

**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."**

A little full disclosure here. That "wiping the dust off as protest against you" part – that's a part that pastor's sometimes employ a little too much. It usually comes up if a pastor is leaving a place where pastor and congregation became unhappy with each other. And it tends to lean in the condemnation direction. But I'm not so sure that is the most helpful feeling to have toward people who reject the ways of love. I think maybe pity is more appropriate. That's a place to feel pity for people who reject God, who put distance between themselves and God's love. How sad for them. And it misses what I think might be the more useful message here.

Think about what really happens to people when they are going around sharing something that is really important and exciting to them. If the one on the receiving end gets excited, if they thank the person for what they said or did, it encourages the person. It gives them more energy to keep doing what they are doing and saying what they are saying. But the opposite is also true. If someone rejects them, disparages them, it takes energy away from them. We even have a saying, "That sure took the wind out of their sails." Maybe the power of Jesus telling them to wipe the dust off of their feet was in the idea that they should not let the opinion of whoever wasn't open to God's way of love weigh them down by even so much as a speck of dust. How often has it been that would-be followers of Jesus don't even venture out because they are worried what other would think? And how sad is that to contemplate? Especially when I think when it has been me. We're

invited to just shake that dust right off and get on down the road. Go. Go on your way, sister.

Now, here is where there ought to be a little pause in the text. The followers went. We don't know how long. Maybe a lot of time, maybe a little. And then it says, **The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" Jesus said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.** This little passage always makes me think of people returning from mission trips. I've been on youth mission trips that went no further than the next town and I've been on multi-generational adult trips that crossed national borders. But the energy, the joy on returning is always the same. Tired, happy, full of joy. Full of a particular type of energy that includes a readiness to go do it all again. I usually call that enthusiasm. Did you know that en-thusi-asm is from Greek and includes the root en-Theos, and means, literally to be filled with God, to be filled with the Spirit of God. Those mission trippers have had sunburns, and blisters, and sore muscles, but they have helped somebody. They have shared God's love with somebody. And living out love is life-giving. It fills us with God. And in these acts of self-giving love – Satan falls from the sky, every time!!

Jesus continues, **"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.**

This is the part of the passage that reminds us that we have been given authority for more than acts of charity. We have authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, over the power of the enemy. There are a few snakes and scorpions I can think of these days that I think we need to figure out how to tread on. You see this happening sometimes with those kids who went on mission trips in their youth. They experienced sharing God's love, they experienced caring about someone unlike themselves. They go off to work or college. Some become activists along the way – seeing and then seeking to address the systems of evil at work in the world. They seek to bring the Kingdom of God to bear in the halls of power. They become seekers of justice, peace-makers, and community builders.

But there is this line about "having authority" and "nothing will hurt you." and I gotta admit sometimes I'm like, "Really?" I don't feel like it. Sometimes I feel pretty darned powerless. Sometimes I'm anxious about what might happen to me, to my loved ones. And then I wonder, "What if that just a big fat lie that Satan keeps telling me to keep me filled with despair and paralyzed by fear and anxiety?" (And here I want you young'uns) to close your ears for a minute.)

What if all of us who are sporting, or starting to sport, more than a little gray hair have more power than any of us realize? What if we are the ones God is calling, appointing, and sending? Retirees are the ones who have the most discretionary time and resources. 4

On average we have 20 years. And we bring a career's worth of expertise to the table. What if God is rounding up this army of gray-haired hippies who have had enough of the powers that be that seem so intent on merrily pocketing more and more of the wealth of creation while more and more of the world suffers violence and want. Sometimes I think those in power act like they can just keep the old folks happy with this or that little bill. They count on older citizens being too worried about their bursitis or about always being within range of a restroom to cause any trouble. I wonder if it's time to buy stock in Depends and go get ready to cause some trouble and make some change.

So let's not forget that Jesus finishes by saying, "**Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.**" Back in the day this would have been called the works righteousness clause. These days it might be called the "anti-performance anxiety clause." It's the "your joy does not depend on you and your doing" clause. Your true joy is your connection through Christ to God's unfailing love. You are connected to God's unfailing love and forgiveness which frees you completely. It frees you from other people's opinions. It frees you from the worries of your own life. Whatever happens, God's got you.

So... So, what then? It brings to mind the question from Mary Oliver's poem, Summer Day. "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" It's the best question. Well, Mae Jean? Well, each of you – either as individuals, or you as Lake Edge Lutheran collectively. What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

My answer to that question has long included this sense of sent-ness. This sense that God has called me and appointed me to be going on my way, proclaiming the Kingdom. I have to say, almost to my dismay, it is increasing with age. I wonder, what world am I bequeathing my children, my grandchildren? How do we start to clean up the mess we've made? What is my plan for this one wild and precious life? The best I can do in answer is the refrain from a song by Rachel Kurtz, that goes, "I want my life, to make a difference: I want my life to make a change. I want my life, to do some good here. I want my life to make a change. I want to be part of a 70. I want to make a difference.

So, what about you? Each of you. And you together as Lake Edge Lutheran. Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? Can you hear Jesus saying to you, "Go on your way."