

Pentecost 6C

July 4, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Isaiah 66:10-14 Psalm 66:1-9 Galatians 6:[1-6] 7-16 ***Luke 10:1-11, 16-20***

It is an unfortunate incident that's all too familiar to us. We see the story played out time and again on the evening news. The details change, but the basic story is always the same... A driver speeds down a highway. Maybe it's a clear sunny day, maybe it's cold and rainy, or maybe even icy. But then suddenly, the car careens out of control, striking a retaining wall, or a tree, or – heaven forbid! – another car.

Emergency services are dispatched to the scene. Emergency Medical Technicians know that time is of the essence, and that lives can be saved – or lost – during those first few critical moments after an accident. Lives are at stake!!! They rush to the scene, and in a mad frenzy of activity the EMTs set about their life-saving mission.

Today's Gospel reading is about a similarly urgent life-saving mission. It's not written in the style of today's gripping suspense novels. You might have to read the whole book of Luke to understand how urgent this life-saving mission is, and discover the cure that will save a life. But just because Luke is not as compelling as the latest James Patterson novel doesn't mean it isn't important.

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Luke is the only Gospel writer who features this second sending of disciples. The first sending – Jesus’ sending out the twelve apostles – occurred in chapter 9, but our cycle of readings doesn’t provide us the opportunity to hear Luke’s account of the sending of the twelve.

Today’s Gospel reading takes up where we left off last week, just after Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. This group of seventy disciples is Jesus’ advance team, just like John the Baptist and the twelve. They are sent to proclaim the kingdom of God and prepare the way for Jesus’ coming.

For Luke, the kingdom of God began with Jesus’ birth. Back in 9:20, Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Messiah of God.”

“Messiah” means “anointed one.” In the Old Testament kings, priests and prophets were anointed by having oil poured on their heads. This showed that they have been appointed by God to lead the people.

So what Peter is saying when he says that Jesus is the Messiah is that Jesus has been anointed by God to lead the people. It’s an acknowledgment that there’s a new kingdom taking place, with Jesus as its head.

Because Jesus is already in the world, and the kingdom of God is already at hand, it's important that these seventy disciples enter the mission field with great haste. Jesus says their mission is like harvest time. Now it's hard for many of us to understand the urgency that this harvest metaphor is supposed to convey, because not very many of us come from farms anymore. I didn't grow up on a farm either; in fact, I've spent most of my life living in cities. But, I'm fortunate to have married into a farming family, so I'll try to take a stab at what this harvest metaphor is supposed to tell us.

Imagine you're a farmer. You've worked really hard for several months to raise a crop. You've tilled the soil, fertilized, planted the seed, watered, and fertilized some more. You've literally plowed all your money into making this crop a success. All your financial well-being for the next year is riding on this crop. You've got to successfully bring in this harvest, or your family just might go hungry. Harvest too early, and you'll lose some of your crop because not all of it has ripened properly. But if you delay harvesting, it may get rained on, and some of it will rot. When the time is just right, when it's time to harvest, you've gotta move fast.

Jesus says that the mission field is like that. There's an absolutely right time to get the word out, and the time is right now. You've gotta work fast. Don't stop to take a bag, or sandals, don't even pause to greet somebody on the road. Go now! And Jesus sent out the seventy, just like he previously sent the twelve apostles. Their mission? Heal the sick, proclaim the kingdom.

First there was John the Baptist, then the twelve apostles. And then, Jesus sent the seventy.

Can you guess who today's workers are? Just who is it that's been chosen to proclaim the kingdom of God today? Each and every one of us. This is exactly what Jesus is telling us to do in this text – go out, and proclaim the Good News. The time is right! There's a dire need for workers to go out into the mission field.

And just where is that mission field? It's right here, in our own neighborhoods, just as it was in Jesus' day. It's time for the harvest.

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If I could read minds, I would probably hear a lot of moaning going on right now. Maybe groans of, "What? Who, me?" I'm reminded of the character Tevye in the play "Fiddler on the Roof." Tevya says to God: "I know. I know. We are your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't you choose someone else?"

Or here's another movie quote that might be ringing through your minds... Remember the old "Mission: Impossible" TV series and the recent movies? Every story starts out with someone saying to Mr. Phelps, "Your mission, should you choose to accept it..."

But, the mission to proclaim the good news is not a mission we can choose to accept or decline. It's a mission given to all Christians. You might say it's our "birthright," through being birthed into the Church of Jesus Christ when we were baptized.

I wonder just what sort of urgency we might take into our local mission fields if each and every one of us considered our mission to proclaim the Good News every bit as urgent as the life-saving mission of an EMT. But in our mission, not only are lives at stake, but people's very eternal lives.

People come up with all kinds of excuses for why they can't spread the Good News. The one I hear most often, though, is, "I don't have a story to tell." That couldn't be more un-true! *You* don't have to have a compelling story. You simply need to tell the compelling story.

What could be more compelling than the story of a common man, born to poor working-class parents in a barn, raised to do a common job, and who winds up leading the greatest exodus in all of human history? This simple man, Jesus, whose frail human form bore the fullness of God. The God who cares enough for all of his creation to have taken on this frail human form in order to provide our deliverance from sin and death. This God who loves every one of us enough to have humanly suffered persecution, physical torture, and a horrifying death on the cross so that each of us may have the hope of living in eternal heavenly peace.

There's a reason that this is the best-selling story of all time. The story of Jesus Christ is compelling all by itself! And, we have confidence that the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of people when the story is told. The Bible tells us so.

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Jesus didn't tell the disciples to go out and be successful – he told them to go proclaim the kingdom. He knew there were people who would readily hear the message, and others who would reject it. But Jesus said the message is the same either way: “The kingdom of God has come near!”

If God can't count on believers to go out and spread the message, who will? Believers are the body of Christ in this world. You're God's arms, hands, legs and feet. There are many out there who haven't heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. They haven't heard what you know to be true.

We've got the most important mission of all time. We've got a life-saving story to tell. People need to hear that God loves them. They need to know that in Jesus Christ they have forgiveness and new life. They need the promise and the hope that you already have. All those people who haven't heard need to receive the healing gift of life in the kingdom of God.

Jesus said: "Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Pray for God to show you the way, then go out and proclaim what you have already received – God's love, God's forgiveness, and God's life.

Amen.

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