

Laborers into the Harvest **July 8, 2007**

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.

Did you know that in the chapter just before this one, Jesus sent the Twelve out with the same exact instructions? We don't know if they went in pairs, or individually, or all together, but they were, otherwise, sent in the same way. We know that they were successful in their task, so maybe Jesus just decided to widen the area of proclamation and send out another seventy. They were to be Jesus' advance set-up team, for he intended to follow them to every town and place.... although, given the job they did in every town and place, it almost seems that Jesus was hardly needed as a follow-up act.

Why the number 70? You may remember in the Book of Numbers, Moses complained to God that he couldn't do it all alone. There were just too many people to care for; he might as well be dead. So God told Moses to gather seventy elders of the people, and he put some of the spirit that was on Moses on the elders and Moses had himself some newly ordained assistants. Another theory is that the world was thought to have 70 nations at this time and the 70 messengers symbolically represented one person for every nation.

They were sent out in pairs, also for two reasons. One for mutual support (they are, after all, being sent out as lambs in the midst of wolves), and one for another biblical reason, straight from Deuteronomy: for any testimony to be reliable, there must be at least two witnesses.

They are to "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and (to) greet no one on the road." Their mission is an urgent one and they are neither to be weighted down by things they do not need, nor to linger on the road speaking with people about the weather.

They are to, whatever house they enter, "first say, 'Peace to this house!'" That is their purpose, after all. They are there to bring the peace of God's kingdom to each home they visit. But some will reject their peace and, when they do, it will not be forced upon them.

"Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you," Jesus tells them, "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.'" They are to eat whatever they are served, without thought as to its ritual uncleanness. It may not be kosher, but it is to be eaten; it will strengthen them for their work, which is more important than ancient dietary laws. And they are to heal; maybe most of all they are to heal. Their purpose is to proclaim the Good News that God's kingdom has broken into the world and come near. Nothing will proclaim that better than the healing those who are sick.

Unlike Moses' crowd of complainers, we hear only that these seventy went as they were told.... lambs into the midst of wolves. They went as beggar evangelists, having no idea whether they would find willing souls eager to receive them, or wolves prepared to rip them apart. They had no idea if they would die of hunger or be permanently crippled by blisters on their unsandaled feet. It was an adventure, but it was also a game of roulette.

And, remember, these 70 people were chosen simply because they had received Jesus and his Gospel. They had no specific evangelism training and they were not the Galilean elite. Nothing is said about their moral fiber or their prayer life, their introversion or extroversion. None of them were cradle Christians or Sunday School graduates. They were, indeed, lambs and they were being thrown out into a world filled with skeptics. They might as well have been on the shuttle to Mars!

The year was 1972. I was a college graduate and a Methodist who had applied for admission to a few seminaries. I chose Duke Divinity School. My minister preferred it to the dangers of letting me loose in an ecumenical atmosphere like Yale, and, very simply, Duke bought me. They gave me a scholarship which consisted of tuition, room, board, expenses and a field ed job. In order to receive the scholarship, however, I had to first spend the summer before entering in a rural North Carolina church. Now, for all intents and purposes, while I had traveled a bit, I had really never spent any lingering time outside of the New York area. I had been a Christian for all of not yet three years. And I had absolutely no idea that I was being sent out as a lamb into the midst of wolves.

My first inkling of this was my first Sunday in the church to which I had been assigned. It was located in Vass, North Carolina.... population 775. God bless the people at Duke; they told me later they sent most people to the mountains, but for my particular survival they thought they had better keep me in the Piedmont. Anyway, on that first Sunday morning as I walked down the aisle next to the minister, people turned to each other and started whispering.... audibly. At first I didn't get it. Then it dawned on me. Following the service, I asked the minister if they had ever seen a Jew before and if they thought I was going to have horns. "No," they had never seen a Jew before, and "Probably yes," to the horns.

I began to wonder if I was going to make it through the summer. The first time I thought I just might was when I saw a bottle of Manishevitz wine in the minister's refrigerator. He said they would ride him out of town on a rail if they knew. To understate it, the culture was very different from what I had all of my life known. At one point, I asked to take the youth group to a Roman Catholic Mass in a near-by larger town one Sunday morning. (I felt this necessary. I had asked the kids in Sunday School class how many thought Jesus was a Methodist and way too many hands shot up.) It was like pulling teeth to finally obtain parental permission. Never mind a synagogue. One day I asked the minister's 16 year old son why there were no black people in church. He told me **that** church was, literally, on the other side of the tracks. "What would

happen if a black face showed up our church?,” I asked naively. “They would be ushered out immediately,” he responded. “What would happen if I went to the black church?,” I asked. His answer was telling and not unexpected, and I will always remember it verbatim: “They would usher you up to the front pew and treat you like gold.” I had been sent out feeling like a lamb in the midst of wolves. I’m certain they felt the same about me.

But when I look back on that time, and at the few photographs I have, I realize that I did not do what those first few weeks I thought I would.... shake the dust from my feet and vow never to return. For I learned an enormous amount from these people and I hope they learned something from me. They taught me, to a certain extent, about hospitality and they taught me about community and the importance of faith in one’s life. I hope I, at least, convinced the next generation that Jesus was not a Methodist, and their parents that Jews do not have horns, that Christians are still Christians however they choose to worship, and that maybe the **only** reason for black people to have their own church is that at their service you could palpably feel the presence of God and celebrate that presence. As much as we shared, however, I know we also parted at the end of at summer with them still not wanting to move north and me not wanting to move south!

The Gospel does not tell us what the seventy may have, naively, been expecting when they went out. It doesn’t tell us whether they were excited or terrified, whether they had preconceived notions about what was about to happen or felt ill equipped to do what Jesus was asking of them. I’m sure they felt some of all of these things. But I know that when they returned they were ready to go out again with no qualms whatsoever. They had returned with joy at their stunning success. They made no altar calls and preached no hell, fire and damnation sermons. As far as we know, they baptized no one. All they did was speak the Name of Jesus, and the sick were healed and God’s peace came to rest upon them; and the Gospel was proclaimed and the demons fell at their feet. Their success gave them a headiness the likes of which they had never known. An intoxication not produced by wine.

“Nevertheless....,” said Jesus. “Nevertheless....” I need you to remember that this is not **your** success.” The power by which demons submitted to you was not **your** power. Sorry, but it was mine. It is the power I give to you for one purpose and one purpose only.... to spread the Good News of God’s love and forgiveness. Try using it for **anything** else and you will fall flat on your faces. Bummer!

The task he gave them was not to be successful. The task he gave them was to be faithful and he would do the rest. They needed nothing else: no bag, no purse, no sandals, no food, no preaching ability, no Sunday School education, no stunning personality, no AK 47. Nada. All they needed was to be faithful to the task given them: to proclaim the Good News in Jesus’ name by sharing his peace and healing the suffering of the world around them. If they didn’t let themselves get in their own way and try to be who they were not, they would be used as God’s

human emissaries to do astonishing things. And **that** is **real** power. Their reward? The greatest of all rewards – their names written in heaven.

We don't send people out much anymore to speak the name of Jesus, even though the harvest is still plentiful, the laborers, few. We pretty much sit and wait for people to come to us. For one thing, we are rightly afraid of wolves. For another, we don't want to get in people's faces, to invade their private space. But notice that is not what these disciples did. They went out with nothing... not food, not clothes, and, especially, not all the answers. They had to do the hardest thing **we** think they could be faced with – become totally dependent upon others. Yet they shared the peace of God's kingdom and healed those who were suffering. Rather than get into people's faces, they simply walked away if their word of peace was not received. But when they were received, and remembered who this was about and why they were there, God's power surprised even them.

If a Jewish girl from the Bronx can survive a summer in Vass, North Carolina in 1972, I am convinced that God can do just about anything with us. It doesn't take a preaching mission. It doesn't even take knocking on doors. It takes only the mustard seed faith that it isn't about me, or about you, but about God's ability to heal the brokenness of the world and bring to it a long awaited peace. The fact that he can do that through anyone of us, wherever we happen to be and whomever we happen to be with at any given moment, is one of the great scandals of the Gospel.

We have been taught to believe that a wolf can face down a lamb any day of the week. But I wouldn't bet on it.

Luke 10:1-12, 16-20
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Rachelle E. Birnbaum