

C Lectionary 14 7.3.22

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Focus Statement: The Kingdom of God has come near.

First off, a bit of a personal aside on our Gospel text for this morning. In seminary, my best friend and I used this passage as an argument against the ELCA's internship policy. As part of the process of being a pastor in the ELCA, seminarians spend a year working as an intern in a congregation. Internship sites are located across the country, and seminarians get only a little bit of say in where they end up. I was sent to upstate New York, Kelli to southern Arizona. On the giant map of the US spread out across the windows of the main hallway, my internship site and Kelli's were a full three panes of glass apart. We spent a great deal of time in that hallway reading this passage and lamenting that Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs, but the ELCA sent seminarians to the furthest reaches of the United States all by our lonesome.

My grumps against how the ELCA manages internships aside—and let me also add I had a great internship site. It was hard, but I learned a lot and overall had a good experience so I ultimately can't complain THAT much—this passage gives us principles for carrying out the mission of the church. Rarely does the Bible give us an actual, easy-to-follow, checklist, but this passage is that. I wrote about it a little bit in my newsletter article this month, so there's a summary of what I'm about to say in the Trumpet. But I was thinking about this yesterday during Woman's Co-op's graduation celebration, and how that event is really an excellent example of what this passage looks like in our context. So the sermon this morning is going to be a little bit of Bible study and a lot of waxing poetic about Co-op's

graduating class of 2022 and how I got a little choked up in the parking lot on Thursday night.

“After this,” “this” being last week’s passage about the three would be followers of Jesus who couldn’t quite make the commitment. “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.” Why seventy? Here’s a fun aside for you. Genesis chapter ten is a listing of all the nations of the world that were known at the time, seventy countries. Jesus appointed seventy, a metaphoric nod to every country of the known world and Jesus’ intentions for the Kingdom of God to spread everywhere. Seventy is a preview of what will happen in the book of Acts, when the kingdom of God will spread from “Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

But I wasn’t thinking about that on Thursday, I was thinking about the next line, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” It was a motely crew assembled in our parking lot, looking various degrees of uncomfortable in their purple caps and gowns. Polyester of course, just the thing for a ninety-degree summer afternoon. There were bored children running every which way, one insisting on regularly throwing her sippy cup at Damien. It was windy, people’s caps kept blowing away. Earlier in the day, Teresa and Kayla came into my office to ask if they could move the shopping cart that had somehow turned up in the middle of the parking lot, so that there wouldn’t be a stolen Walmart cart in the back of AccessVision’s graduation footage. And before you ask, I don’t know how we came to have a Walmart shopping cart on the property, though I’m pretty sure how it

ended up in the middle of the parking lot was children. Point being decorum was not the order of the day. Laughter was, family was, figuring it out and getting it done was. And, when I looked at that group of graduates, when I heard Chris Sargent say to them repeatedly, this community is lucky to have you. When I saw their families beam with pride as they strode across the lawn to get their diplomas, watched them huddle in a class group hug at the end, heard the places they're working, the people they're serving, the impact they're having. I thought of Teresa, Val, Kayla, and Mia who were responsible for getting them to today, I thought of you all, of us, who somehow keep this building open and the lights on for them to do this work, I thought, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Guys, I don't know how Co-op runs the programs they do with the staff and budget they do; I don't know how we keep the lights on, the roof intact, the finicky furnace running so they can do that work. But I know this, the work matters. This work matters. This is God's work, and the world needs it. And I don't think this is me being arrogant or prideful about us either, though I am a little arrogant and prideful, I won't lie. But when I sat under the awning on Thursday and looked out at those amazing humans who had gone through so much, been overlooked so many times, and who were making their lives and this community a better place through their hard work and persistence, you cannot go to Co-op's graduation and not be filled with the conviction that this work matters. And let me throw this in as well. I'm not a big believer in signs from God. I respect those who have that sort of faith, it's just never been a big part of my faith. But the only way our budget, and quite frankly Co-op's budget, make sense, is if God believes that this mission is worth sustaining. Because Doug and Bob can tell you, and often do, the numbers don't add up.

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.” This work matters, and prayer is how we get there.

Prayer is part of the mission of God. But here’s the tricky thing about prayer that often gets overlooked, “Go on your way,” Jesus said after that. Because when we pray for laborers for the harvest, the laborers God sends are often, well, us.

And let’s talk really quick about what it means to be sent by God into the harvest. Because we tend to think about being sent to mean leaving everything behind and traveling a long distance. And it could mean that, it certainly does for some, it did for the seventy. But it doesn’t mean that for everyone. The bible just kind of seems like it does because the Gospels were written by the ones who were sent on long journeys. But there are plenty of disciples whose mission and ministry were much more local, who were “sent” to stay right where they were, in the places they lived, to do God’s work there. Just a couple weeks ago we read the story of the Gerasene demoniac, who after he was set free from the demon begged Jesus to let him go with Jesus on his journey. But Jesus said to him, no, your mission field is here. “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” Do not sell your ministry short because you don’t think you are able to give up everything and follow Jesus. Like the Gerasene demoniac, that may not be your harvest. Your harvest might well be right here.

Whether you go or stay, Jesus then instructed the seventy that when they entered a place, they were to “remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid.” There’s a lot packed into this comment, but the big takeaway

for me is to not impose our own cultural expectations on others. Meet people where they're at, not where you're at, in simple terms. This is a good lesson for hosts and guests, it's also a good reminder for cohabitation. I've had a lot of housemates over the years, and some of them had quirks. But they'd probably say the same thing about me. Sharing space Under One Roof, or at this crowded table, or whatever metaphor you want to use for what we try to do here at 2055 East Michigan is complicated. Co-op is weirdly terrified of the back hallway, we get real annoyed when they leave donations EVERYWHERE, and no one likes it when kids lock the handicap accessible restroom, but we're figuring it out together. Trying and failing to give each other grace, one day at a time.

And finally, and here's a big one, know that it's not always going to work out. And when it doesn't work out, when they do not welcome you, shake the dust from your feet and move on. But remember in this moving on the Samaritan villages from last week, villages that will eventually be gathered up in the movement of the early church in Acts. Moving on does not mean that place will not be gathered, those people not included, it just means that place, those people, are not for you to gather, or at least not at this time.

As I sat at graduation on Thursday, I was cognizant of all the faces that weren't there. Trainees who'd dropped out, caterpillars still cocooned somewhere. I wondered where they were now, and I worried about them. But I've been here long enough to see Co-op members come, go, and come back again to know, it doesn't always take the first, or fourth, or forty-second time. People come and go, and come again, and however long it takes, the promise remains, "the kingdom of God has come near."

Dear people of God, the kingdom of God has come near. The kingdom of God is here. In purple polyester graduation gowns and mysteriously appearing shopping carts very possibly unsafely ridden around the parking lot by very happy children. In freeze pops and organ music, and fears that afternoon organ music means I'm trying to sneak in a secret funeral. In janitors who are afraid of spiders and tour guides who call me gangster and children who, well, I won't say in a sermon what John Kolo's nickname is—come to Family Camp to find out. In sound systems that squawk, a streaming camera that sometimes turns itself off, and a hot, stuffy, unairconditioned sanctuary that has played host to several dogs—not all invited, a handful of bats, countless spiders, and one very lost chicken. In Congolese gardeners and roofers who avoid me in the grocery store and parts of yard games in trees and on roofs and Burmese removing ivy with machetes. In taco bars and ice cream sundaes, diplomas, pomp and circumstance, and very proud moms, spouses, and children. It's messy and complicated, chaotic and loud. It is also sacred and holy, grace-filled and live-giving, and it is the kingdom of God. Know this, dear people of God. Despite us and because of us, in this place the Kingdom of God is near. Thanks be to God. Amen.