

I speak to you in the name of the living God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. *Amen.*

A favorite praise song draws heavily from today's Gospel lesson. Its chorus goes like this: "Praise God for the Body – Praise God for the Son – Praise God for the life that binds our hearts in one." The song continues: Joy is the food we share – Love is our home, brothers – Praise God for the body – Shalom, Shalom!

Today Luke tells us about seventy hearts, bound in love and joy, who were appointed by Jesus to go ahead of him to every town and place he intended to go himself. "The harvest is plentiful," he says, "but the laborers are few." Can you imagine how those seventy felt to be called, entrusted with the work of the Lord? And then, as the song reminds us, Jesus gets serious: "Guard your circle, Christians – clasp your hand in hand - Satan cannot break the bond in which we stand! Shed your extra clothing – keep your baggage light - rough will be the battle and long will be the fight!"

At the time of this story, the church was not yet the church, but simply a loosely organized group of men, women, and children following along behind a man whose ideas and teachings were radically different from anything they had ever heard. Surely it was exciting, and also frightening for those seventy Christ-filled hearts to be sent out in pairs to prepare the way of the Lord. Jesus was very specific about what they should take with them, what they should do, how they should respond to the people they meet.

So off they go, knowing all the while that they are doing the Lord's work. Luke doesn't tell us what happened while they were gone, unfortunately. But remember these were not the twelve disciples who had been on the Way with Jesus since the beginning, but followers who had been drawn into a *new* way of living, loving God and loving each other, seeking peace. Wouldn't it be great to have some anecdotes about how they fared, about what it felt like to share the love of Christ, to do his work of healing, to be accepted and thanked by those who received them? And wouldn't it also be good to know how they managed to continue when they were rejected, turned away by folks whose hearts would not be moved to hear the message of the one sent by God?

But we don't have their stories of success and disappointment. All we have are these words: "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord in your name even the demons submit to us!' And Jesus said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.'" Yes, this was long before the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit formed the body that would be known as the church, long before we fortified ourselves with church law and traditions that sometime became the extra burdens Jesus encouraged his followers to shed. Yes, the lives of Christ-followers seemed to be less complicated back then! But surely our Lord's words were written so that we, too, will hear them; so that we, too, will believe them; so that we, too, will go to prepare the way of the Lord.

As the Church has evolved into what it is today, we've often become distracted away from its purpose, which is meant to be our focus. The Outline of Faith that we rely on as Episcopalians, the Catechism found at the back of our prayer book asks three important questions about the Church's purpose: "What is the mission of the Church?" "How does the Church pursue its mission?" "Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?" The answers are straightforward and should be part of every decision we make and every action we take together: the Church's mission is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ as it worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love through the ministry of all its members. The specific details of how that is done are left up to us. Maybe that's why we tend to stray from the path that was prepared for us to follow; and maybe we need to be asking ourselves—frequently—what does being the church look like and how do we go about fulfilling our mission?

Is it possible those seventy men appointed by Jesus in our Gospel lesson also wondered how they would accomplish his mission? Imagine what they were feeling and thinking as they heard him tell them to take the Good News of God's kingdom into their world. Perhaps Jesus explained to them exactly what he meant when he told them to be prepared for danger, to travel lightly, to trust that the Peace of God they would deliver to others would be not only their purpose, but also their protection. Perhaps all they needed to hear was the urgency in Jesus' voice and all they needed to know was that he believed in *their* ability to do what he asked: that he trusted them to put aside their fears, their doubts and their own circumstances as they traveled to strange places to accept the hospitality of others and say to them "the kingdom of God has come near to you." Did their uncertainty cause them to hesitate, to procrastinate? Luke doesn't tell us that, but we *know* they did what our Lord asked them to do. If they hadn't, it's likely we wouldn't be gathered here today.

So now, imagine that Jesus is standing here among us. He *is* here with us, you know. But when we hear him saying "Listen, I need for you to do something for me," we send him back in time to those days when he actually walked on this earth. The urgency is lost. In the two-thousand-plus years since the Church was first commissioned to carry on Christ's work in the world, countless committees have been formed to do the work, and countless original and unique reasons have been given for why we can't—or won't—do the very same work Jesus called the seventy to do. We've even managed to come up with buzz words that are guaranteed to send folks running, words like evangelism, stewardship, outreach that demonstrate how very narrowly we understand the mission of the church. And in this day and time, we've also come up with words to describe our particular brand of theology—evangelical, conservative, progressive—words that convince folks they must fit into specific categories if they are to fit in with us. It's time for us to stop using labels that restrict and constrain and instead share the joy, grace, and peace that are truly the church's mission; the joy, grace and peace that come back to us again and again when we bring the Kingdom of God to those whose hearts ache for it. Can we dare to believe in the unseen and to tell others of its reality?

A parable is told of an old man and a boy who were fishing on the shore of a great lake. As they listened to the sound of the birds and the whispers of the wind the old man started to tell the boy stories. He talked of how he had grown up and how some things had changed and some stayed the same. He spoke of how he had seen the land on the other side of the lake. "What are you talking about, Grandfather?" the boy interjected. "There is no land on the other side of the lake."

"There surely is, for I have seen it," the old man replied with a smile. "Even though I have never set sail on this lake I have seen the land with my own eyes." The boy was not convinced. "Surely you must be mistaken. I have looked out on these waters all my life, and while I am not privileged to have lived as long as you, I have never seen anything but water."

The old man paused and watched the small waves ripple on the shore, making no effect on the impregnable beach. "You can't see the land from here. You must climb the mountain to see the land beyond the lake." "But Grandfather, no ascent up those treacherous slopes will change my basic view. It will not let me see any farther. Soon you will be telling me I won't know how to walk until I wear your shoes."

The boy, startled by his own energy and passion, began to reel back his line. "Why don't you climb the mountain and look for yourself, my son?" the old man asked. The boy replied, "I don't need to climb the mountain to see something that doesn't exist." And so the conversation faded back to the chirping of birds and the whispering of wind. And the boy never did see the land beyond the lake.

But "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord in your name even the demons submit to us!' And Jesus said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. 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.'" Nothing will hurt you. *Amen.*