

“Marching Orders”

At the outset, I need to take a look at the verses today’s appointed Gospel skipped over: ***“I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But at the judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades.”***

Well, wasn’t that happy? Right up front I need to admit that I have no idea what Chorazin, Bethsaida or Capernaum did that made Jesus so angry. Nobody seems to know where Chorazin is (presumed to be in Galilee because it is mentioned with the other two), Bethsaida was the place where the 5,000 were fed; Capernaum was the site of several miracles. Other than those mentions, we do not hear of any egregious behavior that would have led to Jesus’ harsh words.

Joseph Fitzwater, in his commentary on Luke, renders the opinion that this section is not “pertinent” to the sending of the seventy. I could not disagree more. Why it was left out of the lectionary reading today I think stems from the framers of the lectionary’s reticence to include any passages that have a negative tone, especially from the lips of Jesus. That reminds me of a conversation I had years ago with a fellow-Lutheran pastor who told me they never use confession and absolution in their worship because (and I quote), *“Who wants to start off with all that negativity?”* (Obviously, not he!)

Without knowing exacting details of the offense of these three cities, that Jesus issues this ***“Woe to you”*** message is more than pertinent; it’s foundational. Why is Jesus sending these seventy men out? Luke tells us they were being sent ahead of Jesus to places where He intended to follow. Now, you may read that and wonder, *“Why does Jesus need*

anyone to go ahead of Him? He's been doing just fine up to now."

Why indeed? Is there something about the places where Jesus intends to go that present some level of resistance or even rejection? Is Jesus anticipating that some groundwork would be helpful in order that His coming would not be met with suspicion, or anger, or skepticism? I think so. And Jesus knows — because He has been in such settings already — what points of resistance await at the three locales. Which gives us a new slant on the rest of this passage. Rather than being an impertinent interruption to the narrative, the left-out verses provide us a rationale for the rest of the story.

Jesus is sending out these men because there is a great need for their ministry! People are in danger! Their own behaviors, attitudes, beliefs are setting them up to be set down! This is no kindergarten field trip that Jesus is arranging here — this is serious, life-and-death business!

So, Jesus sent them out with these instructions: ***“Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.”*** They are to travel light, unencumbered by stuff. They are not to dawdle — they have places to go, people to see, things to do. ***“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.”*** They will know who is open to the message they come to share and who is not. When there is receptivity to their message, they are to . . . ***“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.”*** Receptive homes (and people) become ground to have an impact on others.

Note also that Jesus considers these disciples not to be volunteers; while their “salary” is food and drink, it is a payment they are due. ***“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.’”***

We may have been on track up till now with these instructions, and then Jesus tossed in this “ringer”: ***“cure the sick.”*** How does one do that? We know Jesus did it, but, well, you know, “Us?” Remember, Jesus told us that we would do things even greater than what we witnessed from Him. Do we trust that, or do we dismiss it? Who here can cure the sick? Who here has ever tried?

But the central message is not “cure the sick” it is ***‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’*** That’s what Jesus wants people to know. Any healing would be simply a sign of that kingdom; the reality of the kingdom is that Jesus was on the scene.

Which leads back to some negativity, again: ***“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’”*** Jesus knew that these missionaries would not always be welcomed, accepted, or believed; He made sure they knew it, as well. But the fact that some would not receive what they had to offer was no reason to stay put, to hide, to be quiet, or to turn back. Here’s the thing they had to keep in mind: ***“Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”*** Whatever happens, it was not about them — it was all about Jesus. We would do well to keep that in mind, also. We get hung up on what other people might say, do, or think in regard to us that we forget: It’s not about us — it’s all about Jesus.

So they go out with these marching orders, and they come back a while later. Luke does not tell us how long they were out there — that day, a week, six months . . . we don’t know. However long it was, it was a time to remember. They come back practically giddy: ***“Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!”*** They hadn’t expected that; they hadn’t been primed for that. That was icing on the cake. And Jesus joins their enthusiasm: ***“I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.”*** You guys did it! And don’t for a moment think that’s the end

of it. ***“I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.”*** Authority! As in “Wow!!”

But therein lies a danger: we are always captivated by the “wow factor.” This is why we like magicians like David Copperfield or David Blaine: they make us go “*Ooooh! Wow!*” when Copperfield makes the Statue of Liberty “disappear” or Blaine lifts himself off the sidewalk. We always want to see the replay of that spectacular catch at the baseball game, that amazing run on the football field, that almost unimaginable shot that swished through the basket at the last second.

But in matters of faith, the “wow” can keep us away from the “who.” The core of the mission is not to make people go “*Holy cow!*” and that be the end of it. No, the goal is to bring people into the same relationship with Christ that defines the kingdom of God: ***“rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”***

Okay, so the seventy had a great time. Jesus enjoyed Himself, as well. So what? That is the question: “*So what?*” What does this mean for us? What are we to learn, or understand, or to do as a result of this account? Yeah, yeah, yeah . . . we need to go out and tell the message. We’ve heard that before. I’m sure you have, because I’ve said it before.

What should capture our attention this morning are three things: 1) The urgency that Jesus places on this mission; 2) The authority He gives to those who go on the mission; and 3) The obvious joy in doing the mission.

As we noted, Jesus realizes that there are people who will not accept, embrace, acknowledge, or believe in Him. True in His day; true today. How do we deal with them? We learn from these seventy: Get to it. There is no grand strategy here, no “Master Plan for Evangelism.” It is simply: ***“Get out there. Talk to as many as you can. If you get a positive response, praise God! If you don’t, move on!”***

Now, I know somebody will object: “*Aren’t we supposed to care what happens to those who don’t respond positively?*” Yes, we are. But that gets us back into the “it’s about me” category; “*What am I supposed to do now so they will like the message I bring?*” It’s not about you. Plus, you don’t know how the next encounter they have with someone in two weeks might bring about a wholesale change of attitude, but that would happen only because they first heard from you.

Time’s a-wastin’! Gotta get to it. People are lost out there. You have the authority to do something about it. Would you turn to the person next to you and say, “*I never noticed your authority before!*” Actually, I should have you do that in front of a mirror, because that’s the real problem: we don’t accept the authority we have been given.

Now, please note that authority and power are not the same thing. Jesus has the power. Jesus, from that power, gives us authority. Authority to do what? Make demons obey? Yep! (Come on, Pastor, do people really believe in demons anymore? Do people believe in angels? [80% + say they do; fewer than 15% say they believe in demons. Could that be a problem?]) Cure the sick? You betcha! (Really, isn’t that what we have hospitals for? Of course, and we rejoice when modern medicine finds a treatment, a protocol, a cure for what previously had been an untreatable ailment. But I’d be willing to wager that somewhere near 9 out of 10 doctors will have at least one story where somebody’s recovery was outside the explanation of medicine.) Speak the Gospel? That’s what it all about!

I remember that episode of the Andy Griffith Show where Barney is afraid to confront some tough guys who are selling produce illegally on the edge of Mayberry. Finally, he goes up to them and tells them that they may be bigger than he, but his badge meant that there were all kinds of people standing behind him who would see to it that they obeyed the law. That is the deal with authority. It is how every soldier can even dare to do the job assigned — because he knows behind him is a squad of fellow soldiers, and behind them is a platoon, then a company, battalion,

brigade, division, corps . . . with a supporting air force, navy, and (to top off the whole equation) a vast array of nuclear weapons. We have to get over this notion that what happens in the realm of our Christian witness and outreach is up to our powerful (or for many of us, powerless) witness.

Rick Warren, in his book The Purpose Driven Church, writes: *“Surfing is the art of riding waves that God builds.”* We can't build waves. Later he writes: *“The problem with many churches is that they begin with the wrong question. They ask, ‘What will make our church grow?’ This is a misunderstanding of the issue. It’s like saying, ‘How can we build a wave?’ The question we need to ask instead is, ‘What is keeping our church from growing?’ What barriers are blocking the waves God wants to send our way? What obstacles and hindrances are preventing growth from happening? All living things grow — you don't have to make them grow. It's the natural thing for living organisms to do if they are healthy. For example, I don't have to command my three children to grow. They naturally grow. As long as I remove hindrances such as poor nutrition or an unsafe environment, their growth will be automatic. If my kids don't grow, something has gone terrible wrong. Lack of growth usually indicates an unhealthy situation, possibly a disease.”* [pp. 15-16]

Those are questions we need to ask here: *“What is keeping our church from growing? What barriers are blocking the waves God wants to send our way? What obstacles and hindrances are preventing growth from happening?”* I'll bet we will discover that one barrier is a lack of a sense of urgency. And a second barrier is a failure to understand — or put to work — the authority we have in Christ.

But let's not lose focus on the outcome of the mission of the seventy: they returned **“with joy”**! One of the facets of our present situation is that it can rob us of joy — and that can become manifest to others. There is no joy in “going through the motions.” There is no joy in worrying about the future. There is no joy in wondering, *“Is something wrong with us?”* There is great joy in speaking the truth in love. There is great joy in bring healing to those who need it. There is great joy in walking with Jesus.

We are called — and sent — to do all of that! One pastor asks: “*What if we could make every activity of the congregation a joyful experience? (Isn't 'joyful Voters' Assembly' an oxymoron?)*” What if . . .? What if it all was joyful? What if . . .?

C. S. Lewis' book about his own conversion from atheism to Christian faith is entitled *Surprised By Joy*, which comes from a line of poetry by William Wordsworth. In it, Lewis essentially describes how God brought him from youthful despair into a joyous embrace of God's love. That was a thirty-year journey.

“*Make it all joyful!*” Could those be our marching orders? I would not be surprised.

Amen.