

Sermon for September 4, 2016 – “Change of Plan”

23rd Sunday in OT, Year C – Text: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

If this morning’s reading from Luke’s gospel tells us anything – it’s that you do *not* want Jesus organizing volunteers at your church. Can you imagine? Everybody’s milling around in coffee hour after the service, chatting and laughing and getting caught up with each other. And then Jesus steps into the middle of the room, clearing His throat and holding up a clipboard as He says loudly: “Excuse me, can I have everyone’s attention for a minute? “I still need seventy volunteers for a service opportunity this week. This is a great chance to go out into strange and dangerous neighborhoods and invite yourselves into people’s homes. It’ll almost be like you’re defenseless lambs sent out alone into the midst of ravenous wolves. Oh, and please remember not to bring anything that might make it easier or safer or more comfortable for you to do that, okay? So just come on over here and we’ll get you all signed up. Thank you!” Now I ask you, is that any way to recruit volunteers? Of course not! How could Jesus expect anyone to sign up? I mean, everyone knows you have to sell it, right? Actually, truth be told, you have to soft sell it don’t you? You have to tell people it won’t be hard, that anybody can do this, that it won’t take a lot of time or effort, that everything’ll be set up for them – all they have to do is show up. You have to make it easy for them to commit, so your programs can be a success – right? So, what’s Jesus thinking?

Of course, He wasn’t asking for volunteers. That’s a pretty important thing to notice right from the beginning. Jesus appoints the seventy and sends them out. He doesn’t ask for volunteers nor wait to see who comes forward on their own. He’s the Lord, after all. And let’s face it, Jesus can do what most pastors and other church leaders only **dream** of doing. But still: “I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves”? What’s up with **that**? I mean, this is clearly dangerous territory and he’s sending them out completely unprepared and unable to fend for themselves? And wolves aside, without money, how can they buy food or get a place to stay? Without a bag, what are they supposed to do about extra clothes if they get cold or wet or just dirty from the road? Doesn’t He know they’re going to need these things?

I think one reason this passage is so hard for us to understand is that it goes completely against one of the fundamental values of our culture, and that’s self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is so important to our sense of satisfaction that there’s a whole industry dedicated to equipping us to go out and test it ourselves. If you go to someplace like L.L. Bean, Cabela’s or Bass Pro Shops, then you’re likely to find everything you need to make it on your own in the wilderness. And I do mean everything...High tech boots specialized for maximum performance in different activities, socks and clothes with that keep rain out or wick sweat away from your body or trap heat in or breathe to let heat out, tents and sleeping bags that can withstand gale force winds but pack down to the size of a loaf of bread, food that never spoils, takes up almost no space, and tastes like it’s from a gourmet restaurant if you just add water, compasses, maps, GPS systems, and so on and so on. You can be fully prepared for any contingency you might encounter while you’re alone out in the wilderness, any situation that might endanger or just inconvenience you. But the whole point of what Jesus is doing is ensuring that He’s sending these seventy apostles out completely **unprepared**! They’re not permitted to take anything that might give them any level of self-sufficiency. As a result of all this, they’re the complete opposite of self-sufficient. Their well-being is utterly dependent on the people to whom they’ve been sent. They will rely completely on the kindness of strangers. But you know that some of the people they visit will respond with hostility rather than hospitality. And, you can never tell which you’re going to get until it’s too late.

You can plan for nothing. Now, I'll admit, I love to plan. Just ask Jane... When we go on vacation, I have everything all planned out; where we'll stay, where we'll eat, what we'll see and so on. I even make plans that allow for spontaneity – if **that** makes any sense. I know lots of folks who love to plan. My dad was like that. But, sometimes the biggest problem with our plans is that they work. Almost by definition, a plan is something we **expect** to succeed. But, in order to ensure a plans success sometimes we tailor the goal to meet the plan rather than the other way around.

The formula for success it's been said is to "under-promise and over-deliver" as you plan your work. They used to say that a lot in the car dealerships I worked at. If you do that conventional wisdom says you can ensure that your plans are always successful, because you never promise more than you can achieve. But here's the problem...In the process it's very easy to lose sight of the whole reason you're doing this in the first place. Being "successful" begins to matter more than what you're succeeding at. Jesus, it's pretty clear, isn't concerned about being "successful". Certainly not in the way **we** tend to understand it which may be why He's so blunt with the seventy about how difficult and dangerous this mission might be. This isn't going to be easy, He tells them. Not everybody can do this. It's going to require an extraordinary amount of time and effort and no matter how hard you try, you're **not** going to be able to control the outcome. Some of the people you visit will not share in the peace you offer. Sometimes whole towns that you visit will reject you. But that's not the point. What concerns Jesus most is ensuring that as many people as possible get to hear the good news that God's kingdom is coming soon. That's the point. That's **His** goal. That's **His** definition of success. Because you never really know who's going to respond to the message and who's not. You never know who's really open to receiving the gospel, receiving it in all its beauty and difficulty and complexity and grace and start living their lives more faithfully and fully as a result. You never really know who's desperate to hear good news so you have to go out to **them**. Why? Well, because you can't expect them to come asking about it if they've never heard it or heard about it, or if they don't realize that they even **need** to hear it. You just cannot plan on them coming to you. Jesus didn't. He was definitely not a church planter – by any means.

So, you see, when you get right down to it I think that the biggest challenge facing mainline Protestant churches in North America today is that (for the most part) our whole plan of how to do ministry is designed to welcome people **in** to hear the good news. The whole "build it and they will come" deal. The idea that if just if we find the right pastor, create solid youth programs and Sunday school classes and so forth then people will flock to back to our churches. They'll give generously and all will be right with the world again and with God. That's what we did and for a time, it worked pretty well. For the most part, that's what pastors had been trained to do. It's how congregations had been organized to function. And that's how we've always evaluated our success, by how many people attended worship, by how much they gave, by how many people joined the church as members. And, again, that plan seems to have worked pretty well at one time. How's that working for us now? I mean, times have changed. The neighborhoods that surround our churches have changed. Congregations have changed. And, for these and lots of other reasons, fewer and fewer people all across the country are coming in on their own now. That doesn't mean they're not hungry for good news. I actually think as do most church "experts" that quite the opposite is true. And while this may be a little harder to admit, I'm wondering if maybe we haven't given them enough reason to think we really have any to share.

Then, of course, is that growing number of people who've never even heard the good news. Those who might not know what they've been missing, that they even need it until someone tells them about it. In any case, it's time for a change of plan.

Whoa! Wait a minute, we might want to say, I see where this is going. That whole evangelism thing, right? Well, listen, that's **not** what we signed up for. That's **not** why we joined the church. Maybe not, Jesus agrees. But then, what did you sign up for? Jesus is saying that the harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few, and he's not asking for volunteers. We've already gotten our marching orders. You remember the "Great Commission," don't you? You know, Matthew 28, verses 19 and 20?

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

Oh, **that** Great commission...right!

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing...The church is to be on mission with God. Ours is a missionary God who graciously and relentlessly pursues people. That pursuit involves both the work of the Holy Spirit **and** the proclamation of His people, and that proclamation often the local church. The church exists to proclaim the gospel and demonstrate the kingdom of God in a lost and dying world. In being faithful to her calling, the church should be reaching people with the good news of the gospel and welcoming them in to a local community of believers.

Welcoming people into the local church should be the natural overflow of a local church's faithful ministry. Whatever happened, I wonder, to the strategy of simply inviting a friend, co-worker, or neighbor to church? According to research, it's still the most effective way to reach people. A few years ago a survey of 15,000 adults was conducted a survey to try to determine the most effective way to bring folks into church. Number one? Personal invitation.

- 67% said that a personal invitation from a **family member** would be very/somewhat effective in getting them to come to church.
- 63% said that a personal invitation from a **friend/neighbor** would be very/somewhat effective in getting them to come to church.
- 63% said that they are very/somewhat willing to receive information about a local church from a **family member**.
- 56% said that they are very/somewhat willing to receive information about a local church from a **friend/neighbor**.

So, people are open to an invite from church particularly if it's from someone they know. But one simple invitation doesn't guarantee anything. See, they may come because of an invitation and hospitality but they'll stay for the community. And I think that is something we very much have in abundance here!

So yeah, Jesus is sending us out, but He's not sending us unprepared. He's giving us good news to share and partners to go with us and help share it. That will be enough. Go and you'll see.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.