

Sunday, July 3, 2022

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

In the small rural Lutheran Church in which I grew up there is a stained-glass window that depicts Jesus standing at the door holding a lit lantern in one hand, the other raised as if to knock on a door. It is a picture often portrayed in stained-glass windows and other art forms in churches throughout the country.

That window reminds us that Jesus seeks out those who will follow him, follow the life he outlines for us in commands, in parables and in miracle stories.

I suspect that as we look at that image of Jesus, we envision Jesus knocking and should someone open the door – perhaps us – Jesus would then ask if he could come in. If we opened the door and invited Jesus inside, we would surely enjoy his company and the conversation that would ensue.

However, what if instead of Jesus knocking asking if he could come in – what if he is asking if we will come out and join him. Aha – different scenario, different image, different message.

Another image – years ago, especially in the summer, kids would walk or ride bikes to friends' homes and ask their friends to come out and play. What if this Jesus about to knock on the door is like many of us back then – asking if we can come out and play?

In a very real sense, I believe this is the crux of our gospel text today. Jesus is inviting us as he did the seventy to come out and play, that is to join him in proclaiming God's love to all we meet.

It is really impossible for me to read this gospel text today and not think about and pray for missionaries around the world. I've always suspected that all missionaries are a special breed, sent by God into foreign and sometimes, even today, very difficult situations to bring God's words of love and peace to people who may have never heard of our Triune God and his message that is over 2000 years old.

I constantly marvel at their dedication and ability to move around the world and present our God to others. I marvel that over the centuries missionaries have been to all corners of our world proclaiming God's grace, love, and salvation through Christ Jesus.

I am also concerned and somewhat saddened to realize that one of the biggest mission fields in the world is the United States of America.

Some years ago, the reality was that Christian missionaries were coming here to speak to Americans about this Jesus they follow.

The whole world continues to be a mission field where in many places, the United States of America included, are seeing that more and more people each year do not know who Jesus is.

I'm reminded of a story of a mother and daughter shopping for a birthday present for the daughter in a jewelry store. They were studying the selection of beautiful necklaces. The daughter spotted some she liked. She told her mother that she was liking the selection of crosses, but not any with the person on it.

Christ's words. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" takes on a new and urgent meaning, doesn't they?

Most of us have grown up in the church. We've grown up in the church at a time when church growth was the norm. Churches grew in numbers of members and the number of new churches continued to spring up as the suburbs began to extend farther and farther out of cities. Existing churches added new worship space and added education space.

In many communities it seemed that everyone belonged to a church. Again, church membership was the norm. We thought the trend would never end. We somehow expected churches to grow and new churches to be planted. Back then we couldn't envision a time when folks from other countries would consider the United States of America as a mission field.

But then the 50s and 60s morphed into the late 80s and 90s and we saw a decline in church growth and churches experienced, many for the first time, a decline in members. And many started to lament and wish for the 50s and 60s without realizing that what occurred then was not the norm but rather a blip on the continuum.

And since then, we've seen a steady decline of members in congregations and the number of congregations in most communities. Other congregations like Christ/Emmanuel are dealing with a new reality that presents many challenges moving forward but also creates new opportunities as well.

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few..."

It is difficult to look to the past and realize that what once was – is no longer. We may indeed lament, but we cannot get bogged down and become catatonic, unable to move forward with purpose and mission.

It seems that today the fact is that we are among the "few" laborers. We meaning all who follow Jesus today, both here and around the world. Given a choice hopefully we would want to be part of the "many" who are sent into the fields to expand God's kingdom.

Few or many – our job description is the same as it has always been. And we can approach our task with energy, positivity, and hope.

Our gospel text informs us that Jesus invites his followers to go out and join in the work he has already been doing. And they returned delighted to have been able to participate.

So, using once again the image of Jesus knocking on our door and inviting us to come out and join him, we are to go wherever he leads us – which is often to people and situations we could never imagine.

Jesus and countless others have gone before us. We are not the first, but we are now the followers Jesus has to speak truth in love, to live out what it means to be a Christian today and every day.

NBC evening news on the weekends ends with a segment entitled “There’s good news tonight” or something close to that. And for us our gospel text today is filled with good news.

The 70 returned and instead of talking about all that went wrong, all the mistakes they might have made, all the rejections and curses they endured, they returned ecstatic. They said, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us.” What a witness to the power of God leading his people into the mission fields. These 70 were indeed excited to have been on that mission trip. God certainly didn’t fail them and in fact led them all the way and showed them the power his words of love and salvation can have on all who will listen.

There are less than 70 present here this morning. Yet today and every day we are sent out to witness to Christ and his love for all people.

We may not go from town to town. We may not stay in a stranger’s home and eat what is prepared for us. But each and every day we have the opportunity to let Christ’s teachings lead us to speak to others as Christ would speak to them.

And certainly, today that is a potentially daunting and frightening thought and task. We live in a world the likes of which we have not encountered before. All of you know the details and understand it is easy to get discouraged and simply want to give up.

Yet, as baptized followers of Christ that is not an option. We are always on, that is, we are always followers of Christ, witnesses who are tasked to proclaim God’s word amid the chaos we encounter.

When the 70 returned and proclaimed that even the demons submitted to them, Jesus said to them and to all who follow in their footsteps, “I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.”

As we live out the authority given to us by God through Christ, we will be showered with peace and mercy.

As the current laborers in the mission fields of the world we are given all that we need to step out in faith each day, recounting the many who have gone before us and recognizing that others will follow in our footsteps. May God lead us, guide us, give us the words to say and bless our efforts in his name.

Thanks be to God.

