

Ambassadors for Christ”
Pentecost 6c
Luke 10:1-20

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Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus’ Name.

The first verse of last Sunday’s gospel reading says, “When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” I told you last week that most Lucan scholars claim this verse marks the beginning of what they call Jesus’ travel narrative. The narrative goes on for ten chapters until Jesus enters Jerusalem. Last week I tried to make the case that the travel narrative does not end at the cross and empty grave. That is because you and I are travelers still. We remain on the way, the way of faith and faithful living. That makes the travel narrative a handbook on Christian discipleship for us. It seeks to draw us ever more deeply into the journey in which we take up our cross daily and fall into step behind Jesus.

There is something comforting about our place in the order of things. We fall in line behind Jesus. I notice the school children here do not like to fall into line behind anyone. The school children vie with one another to be line leader. A man I know left the Tampa fire department where he was a lieutenant to become the fire chief in Avon Park, FL. Ever heard of Avon Park? He explained his decision by saying, “Unless you are the lead dog, the scenery never changes.” That’s what we call a colorful expression. I had to think about that awhile before I realized how colorful the expression was. But, as much as the scenery may change for the lead dog, she also is the one who has to break the trail through the snow. It is that much easier for each dog on down the line. If we follow we do not have to do as much work. And we are not responsible for the directions. Someone else is reading the map and operating the compass. Someone else enters the data in the GPS system or looks for trail markers along the Appalachian Trail. The person in the lead will bear the brunt should trouble arise. We are only following. A friend described to me the first time he took out the sailboat as the captain with two friends who had never sailed before. He got out into the bay just fine. They enjoyed sailing around but when it came time to go in he could not find the harbor. Someone else had always done that and directed him toward it. He thought he had paid attention. He didn’t want his friends to know he could not find the harbor on the shoreline.

In today's gospel reading Jesus taps the disciples on their collective shoulder and makes them line leaders. Jesus pulls them from their relatively safe position following him, having little or no responsibility, and he propels them on ahead. Our text says "send out laborers into his harvest." But the word used is the same word used for what Jesus does to the demons. He throws them out. He propels the disciples. He sends the disciples before his face. His face is set for Jerusalem. We know what happens there. He sends them as his ambassadors, part of the kingdom campaign, announcing the promise to those who accept him and reject him, "The kingdom of God has come near." Only now there are more than twelve disciples.

Jesus commissions 70 or 72. It depends on which Bible you read. And does it matter? This is the sort of thing for which we need to call in a Bible geek. We have all heard of computer geeks. But any field attracts those who love the details, the minutiae of the subject. Computer geeks have helped us understand that no one can say, "The details do not matter." One little checkmark in the wrong box matters a great deal when you cannot connect with the internet in spite of how nice you ask. In computer land all the jots and tittles matter. Our text says Jesus commissioned 70 others and sent them on ahead in pairs. An equal number of very early manuscripts of Luke's gospel record the number as 72. I'll spare you all the minutiae, but one of the questions the Bible geek asks is, "Is there any other situation in the Bible where the numbers 70 and 72 are in question?" The Bible geek discovers a possibility in Genesis 10. There we read the list of the nations descended from Noah and his sons after the flood. It just so happens there are 70 of them in the Hebrew text. In the Greek version of the Old Testament there are 72. The number Jesus commissions represents the whole world. When Jesus commissions the 70 or 72 he does so in light of the command to be his witness to Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth, even to the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Gergashites, and the Hivites, four of those listed in Genesis 10. We might feel more comfortable fishing in our Lutheran fjords and harvesting in our Lutheran fields, but Jesus propels us out from our comfort zones.

From the relative safety of following, Jesus taps us to be line leaders. He commissions us. It is a co-mission with him and one another. He puts his authority into our hands. Acting in his name we make Jesus present to the shut-in and hospitalized persons we visit, the hungry we serve at the food pantry, those to whom we bring Grace Care meals, and the children we teach in Grace Sunday school and day school.

Last week I overhear our youth talking over a plan to take part in a mission trip to South Dakota helping those whose homes were destroyed in a flood.

After hurricane Katrina people from Grace made a half dozen trips to help. A team member made a video of one of these mission trips. It was on our web site for a while. It showed us in our tyvek suits, goggles, respirators, hats, boots and gloves in the 85 degree heat, mucking out homes that had stood in six feet of water for three weeks. I was so proud of our congregation that I showed the video to anyone who would watch it when we were visiting relatives in Europe. This was my gentle witness, my role as ambassador for Christ. They were puzzled and seemed slightly amused. I asked the one whose English was best, "Do you know of people volunteering like that to help others in need?" "No," she said, "never."

I'm wondering if Bible passages like this one today have worked their way in the American persona. As one writer put it, "One of the greatest aspects of our country is that American 'can do' attitude. We Americans love to organize for, donate to, and volunteer to solve problems."

Eight people from Grace currently are serving as ambassadors for Christ in Slovakia. They left last Thursday. For forty years the Christian faith was smothered by the Soviet state. Teaching children the faith was forbidden. Volunteers from America brought them the concept of Vacation Bible School. They have that down pat. They had to cap enrollment this summer at 300 and sponsor VBS in the village churches out from the town of Martin. The eight we sent this summer will help lead a Bible camp for 11 to 14 year olds. Bible camp is something else that is new to them. As this generation in Slovakia is nurtured in the faith they are the means the Holy Spirit is using to bring their parents to faith. Now the church in Slovakia is sending out mission teams of their own, even to Russia.

The benevolence ministry for which we pray today is listed in the bulletin as Diaspora Church – Lithuania. Diaspora means dispersed. These are refugees from Lithuania who fled the Nazis coming from one side and the Soviets invading from the other. They came to the US and to Canada. They wanted to keep their church together as they lived in exile. Since the fall of the Soviet state in Lithuania, the Diaspora Church reunited with what was left of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church. Everyone in Lithuania knows someone in their family who was taken to the woods never to return. That is how they describe the brutality of the Soviet state.

The KGB museum in Vilnius, the capitol, maintains the courtyard showing the bullet holes from the firing squads. Churches were confiscated, pastors and priests murdered. But finally, just as Jesus promised, the demons submitted in his name and these heroes of the faith persevered. And now their children are Jesus' ambassadors to a new generation, kindling faith and hope. You are part of that. We support Pastor Romas Pukys in the town of Siauliai, Lithuania with the modest sum of \$3500 per year. That small amount makes it possible for Pastor Pukys to devote full time to the four congregations in his parish. Without it he would have to have a second job in order to support his family.

The mission flows out of the promise. The connection between mission and promise is clearer when I say it this way. The missio depends on the promissio. The mission goes before the face of the Promise Maker. By Jesus death and resurrection the kingdom of God draws near. That is the promise. The mission is to announce that good news and live according to it, until the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.