

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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July 3, 2016

I wonder what this this current time period will be called? Like, what “age” will this be? What I mean is that we’ve had the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, and if we skip ahead we find the Space Age and the Digital Age. So what “age” are we in? One author argues that this is the “age of loneliness.” He says that historically we are a species that is shaped by contact with others. Yet, we now seem to exist apart. If you think about children or adults engaged in parallel play with some technological tablet, phone, or computer this becomes clear. We’d rather look at pictures and posts in a park rather than enjoy the people and pets around us. Research suggests that this social isolation is as strong of a cause for death as smoking and obesity. Individuals are generally more likely to turn to a TV for consolation than to turn toward a friend, in fact two-fifths of older adults report that the TV is their primary companion.¹

Today’s gospel reading from Luke taps into this complexity of life while coping with the difficult aspects of ministry, loneliness included. Scholars believe that the author of Luke is also the author of Acts. Knowing that Acts is all about the acts of the early church, then it’s no surprise that Luke talks about mission. Luke is about

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/14/age-of-loneliness-killing-us>

engaging others in their faith. Today we find that Jesus is talking with others about the difficulties of ministry.

To be clear, ministry is *not* something that only the pastor, or church musician, or parish assistant does. In your baptism, like in Kylie's baptism today, you were marked with the cross of Christ forever. You became a part of what Martin Luther calls the "priesthood of all believers." In that sense you become a priest, priestess, or minister in all that you do. You don't have to wait for me or another ordained pastor to do something. You are a participant in ministry. And the ministry is not just here at the church, but the ministry is in everything you do – work, play, school, BBQs, vacations, and nightclubs. Wait, nightclubs? Yes. Your ministry is 24/7 wherever you are.

So what *is* your ministry? What's your faithful job description? Well, I just said it right before Kylie's baptism, but lets find it on page 228 of your hymnal. 1) Live among God's faithful people. 2) Come to the word of God and the holy supper. 3) Learn the Lord's prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. 4) Regularly pick up the Bible and read it. 5) Be nurtured in prayer and faith – these are the "what" we do as a church, and the "why" comes next. Why do we do all those things? 1) To learn to trust God. 2) To proclaim Christ through word and deed. 3) To care for others and the world God made. 4) To work for justice and peace. That is what it means to do ministry in the world.

This is tough stuff, though, right? So too Jesus identifies a few key things that are difficult about this work in today's reading from Luke. Did you catch them?

First he says, "the harvest is plentiful but the labors are few" (v2). The essence is that there is so much to do, so little time, and so few people! Every congregation I've been in always looks around at the membership and points fingers saying, "This person needs to do more. I do too much around here." The fact is there is so much to do! We don't always realize how much another is doing because there is always more to be done. This is overwhelming. This is burdensome. This is a part of ministry.

Second Jesus says, "they do not welcome you" (v10). We think, "But, I'm so nice, everyone loves me!" No, you're not welcomed. The ministry of working for justice and peace, trusting God, caring for others and the world, and shaping your life around Christ's example means that you're going to be at odds with the world. You are at odds with a world that tells you that success, money, and the best body are the only real ways to be happy. You're at odds with a world that shames you into conforming into a specific way of living – namely living that "white, heterosexual, male, middle-class, United States-born, two-and-a-half kids with a dog" kind of life. You're at odds with a world where the other is feared and xenophobia reigns supreme. You will not always be welcomed in this world. As a faithful follower you live in that vulnerability of rejection.

These are both examples of how Jesus talks about the ways we will feel alone in ministry. We'll feel alone because there is so much to do, and we'll feel alone because we might be rejected. Take a moment now to apply this to your life. I know this is awkward for some, but if I simply give you a packaged sermon with all my thoughts without you doing some work, then I've robbed you of a deeper engagement in the text and stolen your baptismal ministry. So I want you to do this work for yourself. So, grab that white square in your bulletin and jot down a moment where you've felt alone. Maybe it's an issue that you're passionate about and you feel like you're the only one working on. Maybe it's a situation at home or at work that you feel like no one has ever encountered and you're going it alone. Take a moment to jot a few words or sentences about when you've felt alone. (Give a moment to write. Invite people to share in dyads.)

Luke has a response to this loneliness. In fact, Jesus gave the response. Back in Luke chapter nine Jesus sent the twelve disciples into ministry. Here, in chapter ten, Jesus sends seventy. How does he send those seventy? In pairs - Jesus sends them with a buddy on the ministry field trip. One thing to note is that Jesus initially sends twelve in chapter nine. Twelve - that's a key number. Sure, it's the number of the disciples, but it's also the number of the tribes of Israel. Essentially Jesus first sent the disciples to minister to the people who they knew closely – the Jewish people. Now Jesus sends seventy. Seventy, this is another key number. This number relates back to Genesis and the story of Noah and the flood. There we found that after all the earth is wiped away by a great flood, seventy nations inhabit the earth. So Jesus sends enough people here in Luke to cover all nations of the world. Jesus is saying that we minister to *all* people. Not just to the ones who look like us, talk like us, eat like us, drink like us, party like us, live like us, or think like us, but rather ministry is about caring for *all* people. Welcoming *all* people. And our reading from Galatians today reminds us that the true gospel produces a church in which unity exists in the midst of remarkable diversity.²

² Holtz-Martin, Carol E. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Galatians 6:(1-6) 7-16, Homiletical Perspective, p211-213.

So too our mission here at WPLC reminds us of this exact same thing (Coincidence? I think not). Anyone know what our mission statement is? “As a passionate, Christian community, we are committed to nurturing and building up the body of Christ through welcoming, creative, and diverse ministries” (WPLC Mission). As a congregation we believe that diverse ministries make us stronger and nurture our faith. We believe that being brought together in one place is important. Why? Because Jesus doesn’t send us to do the work on our own, but rather Jesus sends us in pairs. Jesus sends us to accompany one another. Jesus sends us with each other so that we’re not alone. Jesus reminds us that God is always with us.

With that in mind, take a moment to look back at the situation you jotted down earlier. Can you think of someone that might help you feel less alone in that situation? (Take a minute to think.)

Last weekend I was away at a retreat. One of conversation groups I was in talked about engaging in justice work and how hard it is because it seems unsuccessful. A group member noted that she didn't think that she had an impact the world. She wondered what she could really do to make the world welcome the stranger or love one another? She said there are too many systemic issues that prevent this from being a reality.

“The harvest is plentiful but the labors are few.”

Here's the thing, - no, we do not have the ability alone to bring unilateral change. However, we *can* have an impact. Here's what it looks like:

It looks like a variety of people in the U.K. wearing safety pins on their clothing. Yes, safety pins. You see, after a lot of divisive rhetoric following the historic Brexit vote, these safety pins are a visible symbol to stand in solidarity with those who immigrated to the U.K. The founder of the movement said, “It's just a little signal that shows people facing hate crimes that they're not alone and their right to be in the UK is supported.”³ The pin communicates that love and has a profound impact.

³ <https://www.good.is/articles/safety-pin-solidarity-immigrants-uk>

In light of the LGBTQ hate crime in Orlando, or the terrorist attack in Istanbul and Iraq and Bangladesh, what can we do? Well, we can stand up against hatred and bigotry in our church, school, and work place. We can have a direct impact by correcting language, creating policies of welcome, and working to educate one another. We *can* work to influence one person at a time in our little corner of the world.

We gather here today, to hear from Luke that we're not in it alone - that we have others by our side. In your baptismal job description the first thing listed was to live among God's faithful people. We take that seriously. We come here to learn and to grow. The job of this church is to equip you with the "what we do," so that you might feel empowered to live out the "why we do it." We equip you to live out your faith by teaching the bible, by gathering for God's holy supper, by engaging in prayer, and by offering opportunities for you to gather with God's faithful people. Then we send you out of here to share your faith by interacting with others, so that you might talk about how unity overcomes division. We send you together to have a righteous anger for injustice. We send you to work for peace. We send you into the world to evangelize and share your faith through word *and* deed. We equip you and we send you as God's children and agents of change.

We all know it's summer. We want to and we should relax a bit during the summer. As a reminder throughout this busy season of summer that you are not alone, we're launching "flat church" today. This is a lot like "Flat Stanley" if you've ever heard of that book. Basically how this will work is you will find a "flat church" in your bulletin. When you're feeling alone or wish the whole church could be with you in whatever you're doing – no matter if it's something fun or something difficult, pull out the "flat church" and snap a picture with "flat church." Then, share the picture with us. In the weeks ahead we'll be sharing these photos to be reminded that we're not alone in our baptismal ministry. As a side note, we'll also be posting this picture on our website so you can bring it up on your phone and have someone take a picture of you holding up "flat church" on your phone if you don't have this "flat church" with you, or if you want to print another one between services.

We are church together – flat or in flesh. Luke reminds us that our God sends us forth to minister to a broken and hurting world. We're reminded that the work is hard, and we are not alone. You are here with this church. We are here with you. We gather here each week to be together, to acknowledge that unity is more powerful than division, and to find little ways to influence our corner of the world. Friends, you are loved; you are not alone; go forth this day to live out our faithful mission. Amen.⁴

⁴ This sermon was informed by two great resources: <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/06/pentecost-7-c-the-ongoing-mission-of-the-70/> and <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4683>