Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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There’s a class in seminary called “homiletics.” It’s a fancy term for the exploration of the art of preaching and writing sermons. As a pastor, one of the more common questions I am asked is how I can come up with something to say every single week. While I sometimes explain this whole sermon thing as a weekly TED Talk of sorts, the homiletician, or the one who prepares to preach, always begins with the Scriptures and then lets the Scripture speak to the context. So, one of many, many, many techniques for beginning a sermon is to look at the text and note what sticks out for further discovery. It could stick out in the ways it grates at our current beliefs, it could stick out as something that affirms current beliefs, it could stick out as something odd, or it could, for some unknown reason, move you. Today, you are going to put on your homiletical hat and give the gospel another read to note what sticks out to you. Take a moment to review the gospel before I ask a few of you to share. For me, there are three things that stick out this week, which I think are worth exploring in a bit more depth.

The first section, verses 1-3, talks about where and how the people are sent. What strikes me is that God’s work is meant to be done in community going into the places that Jesus also will go. Jesus does not send people out singularly but instead in pairs. Jesus indicated that we all need a little support and help as we work to proclaim love, justice, and peace. The world can be a horrific and evil place where we can feel targeted and rejected in our work to love. It’s easy to slip into retribution instead of restoration, it’s more simplistic to retaliate than to reconcile. So, in our work together, we need the support from another and we also need the accountability. We are held accountable by learning of the places Jesus was already planning on going and holding ourselves accountable to enter these places. It’s those places Jesus mentioned in his first sermon in Luke ­– places among the poor, the prisoner, the close-minded, and the oppressed. We are sent to work for God’s love in the midst of conversations around privilege: to work for justice in a racist culture, to work for peace in a militarized world, and to work for love of all people without exception. And, as people of faith, in our baptisms, we are reminded that God gave us a holy community of people. We gather, here, to being to embody the grace, love, and welcome that our God first gave. We come here to be together as one, to strive together as one, and to become more than we could ever be alone.

That’s where the second section, verses 4-16, come into play. This part describes a counter-cultural value. While this value is not a totally un-American, it has been a value that has been rejected in our recent history. You see, this portion of Luke is arguing for an acknowledgement of dependence and interconnectivity. It’s saying that we should accept support and help in our work to bring about God’s ideal world. And, after having celebrated Independence Day on Thursday, we often forget how deeply dependent the pilgrims and pioneers were on each other and the native peoples to survive in a new place. As one indigenous educator notes, “We forget that native peoples taught the Europeans how to smoke and dry indigenous meat and fish and how to plant the three sisters – corn, beans and squash…They also taught how to navigate from place to place by water and over land, how to tan hides used for clothing, how to identify toxic plants and berries and explained the medicinal and culinary use of indigenous herbs”.[[1]](#footnote-1) So too, we forget that early Europeans settled and established “commonwealths” as places where the good of any individual was linked to the good of the whole. In the same way, we forget that Benjamin Franklin, just before signing the Declaration of Independence, noted that “we must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

We so often forget that we are all deeply connected by systems, values, our shared world, and our creator. Instead we’ve been conned into believing alternative values focused on rugged individualism, independence, and being a self-made person. Yet, that is an evil fantasy that is at odds with our God. Instead, Jesus reminded us, today, to accept our inter-dependence and the gifts that it brings. To be open to serving and being served in love. To be vulnerable and live in its discomfort.

Finally, in the last section of today’s reading, we discover that this vulnerability will help keep us focused. For, our work is not done for self-gratification or self-glorification; rather, the work we do together is a part of something larger. For heaven is not a far-off place, it’s not something after death, but rather, heaven is something we yearn for in the here and now. It is both the glimpses of God’s vision today and the hope for the full realization of God’s love, justice, and peace. Or, using fancy Lutheran terms, we believe the God’s reign, or what we call heaven or the Kingdom of God, is already here but not yet fully realized. Sometimes we simplify that to the phrase “already but not yet.” It’s a reminder that we are a part of a larger movement of God. It’s not our own actions that bring about God’s vision, but it is God working through us. It is a gift from God that has practical implications for how we live and act. As Lutheran Christians, we don’t withdraw ourselves to hunker down and wait for a second coming that will save us, but instead, we acknowledge that our God has already set us free from those thoughts and actions that separate us from realizing God’s justice and peace.

So, in our work, we rejoice not in what *we* do but in God’s larger movement. We rejoice not in the church’s publicity following hate crimes, but rather how through an act of hate God’s love was given a boost. We celebrate not the ways we have grown this congregation, but rather how God’s larger work is connecting with a generation and demographic that may have missed God’s vision. For, we continue to actively support a woman and her eleven-year-old child who came to us as an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation this last week looking for support and a better place to live. We do this work because we recognize that Jesus was a refugee, we acknowledge how Jesus welcomed the immigrant and the outsider, and we remember that God works on the borders and with outsiders. So too, we go where God goes, with all of its discomfort and challenge, for we know that we are sent together as God’s children.

 So, friends, there it is. We are given God’s vision for how we might work in God’s name. We’re reminded that we are never alone in our work. We are shaped by our interconnectivity with God and one another. And, we are sent to be a part of God’s vision. Friends, we’ve been given a gift with God’s love and support to be a presence of love in the world. Thanks be to God for sending us out to be part of this “already but not yet” vision of love. Amen.

1. <https://www.post-gazette.com/local/south/2010/11/24/Native-Americans-played-crucial-role-in-settlers-survival/stories/201011240253> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.ushistory.org/valleyforge/history/franklin.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)