

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor John Swanson

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’”

“Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”

The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” He said to them, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

SERMON

“Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.” Imagine yourself being one of the seventy people that Jesus sent out. What would make that journey - that spiritual mission - difficult for you? Given all the restrictions that Jesus placed on those people, what would be your greatest challenge?

A seminary professor asked her class that question and then wrote about the conversation that followed. She said that most of the responses were rather predictable. She said her students were most concerned about: not taking any money even for emergencies, not having a change of clothes, no food, depending on strangers for food and lodging, not being able to choose one’s traveling partner, judging people who did not accept the message. Those were all responses that she had expected to hear.

But then one student said something rather unexpected. He said, “eat what is set before you.” The professor and the rest of the class were silent at first; then a

bit of nervous laughter followed. The student repeated what he had said, this time a bit more emphatically, “Eat what is set before you,” conveying by his tone that he was serious.

When the professor invited the student to elaborate, he told the class that his father had been a pastor in a rural, very poor area in South Dakota. The family was often invited for dinner by parishioners, most of them farmers. He recalled that he and his siblings were admonished by his parents to eat whatever was served. He went on to say that people on remote farms often relied on whatever they could kill or catch nearby for food, even for company. He added, “We just never knew what we would have to eat.”

Reading about this seminary class discussion reminded me of a similar seminary class discussion that I was a part of. Given the fact that I have been out of seminary a while now, I do not remember all the details, but I do remember that we were talking about visiting people in their homes and all that comes with that experience. Somehow our conversation moved and seemed to become a bit negative.

Someone brought up a visit that they had made recently to an elderly woman in a church they were working at. My classmate went on to say that during their visit, the elderly woman who had poor vision, brought out coffee and some coffee cake. Unbeknownst to the elderly woman, probably because of her poor vision, the coffee cake had mold on it.

The discussion in our class quickly focused on what would you do? More specifically, would you tell the lady about the mold and risk embarrassing her or angering her or would you simply ignore the mold and eat the coffee cake?

Because we had a former nurse in my class, our discussion included words like mycotoxins, aflatoxins and fungi. Because we had our fair share of hot-heads and unreasonable people in my class, the conversation also included a lot of animation and tough talk - several people were absolutely up in arms at the possibility of risking their own health by eating the coffee cake. Some even seemed angry at the lady, as if she knew that the coffee cake was infested with mold and brought it out anyway.

Two of my good friends and I sat back in our chairs during most of the conversation, quietly agreeing with one another that this was a rather strange and ridiculous conversation to have in a seminary class. Finally, our professor noticed that the three of us had not said anything, and asked if we had something to add.

One of my friends said, “If an elderly lady brought out coffee and moldy coffee cake, I’m not sure what I would do. Maybe I would eat it, maybe I would gently tell her about the mold or maybe I would just say I am not hungry. I guess my response would depend partly upon how much

mold was on the coffee cake, but it would depend more upon how good my relationship was with the lady. How well do we know one another? Does she trust me? Can I be frank with her? All that impacts what I would do. The bottom line is that it is about her, not me.”

Being sent by Jesus into an unknown future is something that we Christians are called to do on a regular basis. We might not know where God will lead us or what we will be called to do, but we can trust that we will be doing God’s work and most likely, that work will involve reaching out in love to others. What some of my classmates proved by their prolonged debate, was just how easy it is to get all worked up over something that is really unimportant.

My friend said, “The bottom line is that it is about her, not me.” That is the mind-set that Jesus calls us to have. To not get caught up on all the insignificant details, but to focus on the people we are called to serve.

Have you ever noticed, as you are reading the stories of Jesus in the Gospels, that he never gives a dinner party? Jesus is always a guest. Even at the Passover meal at which Jesus presides, someone else prepares the food and gets everything ready. Today we hear Jesus tell those seventy that he sent out, to accept the hospitality of those who offer it, for as long as they offer it.

This model of hospitality is vastly different than the model of hospitality that most of us are accustomed to. Where is the notion of reciprocity? If I invite you to dinner, I will notice if I do not receive an invitation to dine at your home. And what about overstaying one’s welcome? We have unflattering names for people who take advantage of our generous hospitality. The name “free-loader” comes to mind.

Jesus’ idea of hospitality ignores those social principles that we seem to cling to and honor. The student who was challenged as a child to “eat what is set before you” experienced what it meant to be a gracious recipient of hospitality. The professor who shared this story wrote this about her reflections after the class was over, “When I heard his story, I thought about the underlying assumption that those who have more extend hospitality to those who have less. It occurred to me that he also experienced a culture in which social class did not prevent mutual hospitality.”

The social principles that we seem to follow - principles like inviting someone to your home and then having them invite you to their home or only staying a few days as a guest in someone’s house - seem to work and be followed because most of the times both parties involved are playing on the same social and financial playing field. But that is so limiting. Jesus calls us to something much deeper and far more meaningful.

Hospitality and mission are what this gospel passage is talking about. Reaching out to others in love. Sharing the message that God’s kingdom is alive and active in this world. That is hospitality, that is mission. And that is the work of the Christian!

I have to share another seminary story with you. When I was in my second year in seminary several of my

seminary classmates and I took part in a rural ministry experience in central Wisconsin. We all were assigned to stay at the homes of people who lived in or near Marshfield. I stayed with a family who lived on a farm. They rented their current farm because they had foreclosed on the farm that had been in the husband’s family for several generations a few years earlier.

During the extended weekend that we were visiting, we learned about the challenges of rural life and, in particular, rural ministry. But we also had time to simply get to know the family that we were staying with. And the family I stayed with was wonderful. In just a few days I was taken under their wings, this family who had very little, opened up their home and shared all that they had with me.

The weekend concluded with each of us worshipping at the church of the family that we stayed with. Each family was then asked to pack a sack lunch for us to take back for the trip back to our seminary in Chicago. After church was finished, we said our good-byes. The woman who had treated me like her son for several days, gave me my sack lunch and a big hug. I then got into my car and began driving to pick up several other classmates at other churches in the area. As I opened my sack lunch, I found an envelope. I opened the envelope and found a card. I opened the card and two twenty dollar bills fell out. The card read,

“Dear John,

It has been wonderful to get to know you. May God bless you in your future ministry. Please accept this money as a gift for you and your fiancée, Beth. Take her out for a nice dinner on us. God bless.”

This very poor family showed me more about hospitality than few other people ever have. They taught me more than any seminary professor, more than any sermon I have either preached or heard, more than any book I have read and more than any seminar that I have ever attended. They lived their hospitality, even when it was tough to do. That is the message that Jesus is saying. Share my love with all, even when it hurts.

There are so many things that can get in the way of our work as Christians. Mold on coffee cake is one. Fear, laziness, uncertainty are several more. But we are blessed, if we dare to take that step and go where we might be afraid to go. To extend our hands and our hearts in love to others and to grow, with them, in faith. To do that is a true gift. Amen. Amen. © 2010