



“THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME NEAR”

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Pentecost 4C Lectionary 14

July 7, 2019

Our Saviour Lutheran Church

West Lafayette, Indiana

Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin

The political campaigns for the 2020 presidential election are heating up. The Democratic presidential debates have begun. Candidates are holding rallies to fire up their bases in order to send them out on a mission with a message. There will be no successful campaign without a mission and a message.

We see something similar going on in today’s Gospel. Jesus expands his base from 12 disciples to 70. He sends them out two by two on a mission with a message. They will get to proclaim in word and deed the same message Jesus did.

Just what is the message of Jesus’ life and mission? Over the course of my ministry, I have heard many answers to that question. Most of them get it wrong. Some of the answers have been “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “The Golden Rule.” “Love God and neighbor.” “The Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man.” “Do peace and justice.”

They all miss the point. Jesus’ central message is quite simple. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all agree. Jesus says it in today’s Gospel: “The Kingdom of God has come near to you.” Mark and Matthew add a few more words: “Repent and believe the good news.” What is the good news? That the Kingdom of God has come near.

The Kingdom of God is the good news that changes our lives. It is the good news that wins our faith. When we trust it, we get to live our lives in a new way. What is that good news? Just watch what Jesus says and does because he is the one who is bringing the kingdom near. He is the friend of sinners. He forgives those who do not deserve it. He loves and heals those whom the world has rejected. He raises the lowly and brings down the mighty. He undoes the powers of evil and Satan that threaten to destroy the goodness of God. He does it does it . . . for us!

The 70 get to continue proclaiming that same message. Jesus sends them out on a mission. He warns them that it will not be easy. They are to travel lightly. They will not accumulate worldly signs of success. They will often be rejected. But they need not be

worried because Jesus is the one who has sent them. And guess who has sent Jesus? God! With that kind of “divine authorization”, they have nothing to fear.

Jesus’ must have been persuasive. They go out two by two proclaiming that the “Kingdom has come near.” They continue the same work Jesus’ did, welcoming outcasts in the name of God and setting people free from demons and the powers of Satan. They return to Jesus filled with joy because they discovered just how good it was to be sent on a mission like this.

We too have been sent on a mission. The good news that the Kingdom has come near draws us together here at Our Savior. Such good news, however, we cannot keep to ourselves. Jesus sends us back out into the world to our daily lives and work to bring that good news to others. That is what it means to have a mission. The word “mission” means: SENT. God sends us to the bruised and broken places of life to announce: Because of Jesus Christ, you are the apple of God’s eye!

I want to tell a story that comes from one of my favorite American preachers, Will Willimon. It illustrates well what it means to be SENT on a mission with a message of good news.

\* \* \* \* \*

At ten, I was minding my business in Miss McDaniel’s sixth grade class, dutifully copying words off the black board, when I got the call: “Willimon, Mr. Harrelson says he wants to see you. Go to his office.” Mr. Harrelson was our intimidating, ancient Principal.

Shaking with trepidation, I trudged toward the Principal’s office. Passing an open door, a classmate would look out at me with pity, saying a prayer of thanksgiving that it was I summoned by the Principal and not he. Ascending the gallows, I went over in my mind all the possible misunderstandings that could have led to this ominous summons. (I was only a distant witness to the rock through the gym window incident, in no way a perpetrator or even a passive conspirator.)

“Listen clearly, I do not intend to repeat myself: You go down Tindal two blocks and turn left, go two more blocks, number fifteen. I need a message delivered. You tell Jimmy Spain’s mother if he is not in school by this afternoon, I am reporting her to the police for truancy.”

Oh no. God help me. Jimmy Spain, the toughest thug in the school, a sixth grader who should have been in eighth. And what is “truancy”?

Pondering these somber thoughts in my heart, I journeyed down Tindal, bidding farewell to the safety of the schoolyard, turned left, and walked two more blocks, marveling that the world actually went on about its business while we were doing time in school. The last two blocks were the toughest, descending into a not at all nice part of

town, unknown territory to me, what was left of a sad neighborhood hidden behind the school. Number 15 was a small house with peeling paint and a disordered yard – just the sort of house you’d expect Jimmy Spain to live in – tough-looking, small and sinister. There was a big blue Buick parked in front of the house, and as I approached the walk, a man emerged, letting the front door slam, stepped off the porch, and began adjusting his tie, putting on his coat.

I approached him with, “Are you, Mr. . . . Spain, Sir?”

Just then, I remembered that everybody at school said Jimmy was so mean because he didn’t have a dad. The man looked down at me, pulled his tie on tight and laughed. “Mr. Spain? Haw, haw, haw.” Continuing to snicker, he left me standing there, got into his car, and sped off. (I had to wait until I was in eighth grade before someone whispered to me the dirty word for what Jimmy’s mother did for a living.)

I stepped up on the rotten porch and knocked on the soiled screen door. My heart sank when it was opened by none other than Jimmy Spain, whose eyes enlarged with surprise when he saw me. Before Jimmy could say anything, the door was pulled open more widely and a woman in a faded blue, terrycloth bathrobe looked down at me over Jimmy’s shoulder.

“What do you want?” she asked in a cold, threatening tone.

“Er, I’m from the school. The Principal sent me to . . .”

“The Principal! What does that old man want?”

“Er, he sent me to say that we, uh, that is, . . . that everybody at school . . . misses Jimmy and wishes he were there today.”

“What?” she sneered, pulling Jimmy toward her just a bit.

“It’s like a special day today and everyone wants Jimmy there. I think that’s what he said.”

Jimmy, the feared thug who could beat up any kid at Donaldson Elementary anytime he wanted, indeed had on multiple occasions, peered out at me in wonderment. Suddenly this tough thug, feared by all, looked small, clutched by his mother’s protective arm. His eyes were pleading, embarrassed, hanging on my every stammering word.

“Well you tell that old man it’s none of his business what I do with James. James, do you want to go to that old school today or not?”

Jimmy looked at me and . . . wordlessly nodded.

“Well, go get your stuff. And take that dollar off the dresser to buy lunch. I ain’t got nothin’ here.”

In a flash, he was away and back. His mother stood at the door, and after making the unimaginable gesture of giving Jimmy a peck on the cheek, stood staring at us as we walked off the porch, down the walk, and back toward Tindal Avenue. As we walked back toward the school, we said not a word to one another. I had previously lacked the courage to speak to Jimmy the Thug, and Jimmy had never had any reason, thank the Lord, to speak to me. Walking back to school that morning was certainly not the time to begin.

We walked up the steps to the school, took a right and wordlessly turned toward the Principal’s office. I led him in, handed him off to the Principal’s secretary who received my ward. For the first time he seemed not mean and threatening but very small. As the secretary led him toward the Principal’s office, Jimmy turned and looked at me with a look of, I don’t know, maybe regret, maybe embarrassment, but it could have also been . . . gratitude.

That evening when I narrated my day to my mother at supper, she said, “That is the most outrageous thing I have ever heard sending a young child out in the middle of the day to fetch a truant student. Mr. Harrelson ought to have his head examined. Don’t you ever allow anyone to put you in that position again. Sending a child!”

But I knew that my mother was wrong. That day was the best day of my whole time at Donaldson Elementary and preparation for the rest of my life. It was my first experience of a God who thinks nothing of commandeering ordinary folk and giving them outrageous assignments. That day walking down Tindal Avenue was dress rehearsal for many later days when in listening to a sermon, or minding my own business, it was as if God said to me, “You go down Tindal two blocks and turn left, go two more blocks and number fifteen. I need a message delivered.”<sup>i</sup>

People of Our Saviour, can you believe it? Jesus has called us and sent us, of all people, on a mission. We have a message to deliver, the best news that all the Jimmy Spain’s of this world (including you and me!) could ever want to hear: “Everybody at school . . . (even God) . . . misses you and wishes you were there . . . today.”

When that happens, . . . the Kingdom of God has come near!

Thanks be to God!

---

<sup>i</sup> William Willimon, Pulpit Resource p. 6, 2013