

A VULNERABLE CHURCH
A SERMON FOR THE 4TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
IN YEAR C

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Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

For about 15 years before I went to seminary, I was a professional non-profit fundraiser. I spent most of my career directing capital campaigns and managing stewardship programs for parishes, dioceses, and religious organizations. Naturally, I thought a lot about numbers, because we define the success of any fundraising effort by whether we made our goal.

In the middle of a very rewarding career, I began to wrestle with the meaning of God's call in my life. And while discerning a call to ordained ministry both in my own prayers and among a parish community, I read and studied all sorts of reports on the state of the churches joined together in our Anglican Communion. After all, as a numbers guy, I wanted as much data as I could find.

I studied annual reports from the Anglican Church, the Episcopal Church, and others. And of course, each report sounded more dire than the next. A church news agency reported on these documents with a dreadful headline: "reports show a continued decline and a dire future for the Church" and "at this rate, there will be no one in worship by 2040 in our entire denomination."

As I was discerning a call to ordained ministry, these reports kept me up at night with worry. And these reports have led to deep anxiety in many congregations, and among clergy and parish leaders. Even as we think about new strategies for evangelization and church growth, there is a quiet, insistent voice in the back of our minds wondering where all of this is leading us. What hope do we have?

In our gospel reading this morning, we heard that Jesus sent out seventy disciples. Not 700 or 7,000, but 70. And think of what they accomplished! Not only in the story we just heard, with the powers of evil submitting to them, but also and especially in the months and years afterward, as this is the core groups of disciples who preached the Gospel and took the Good News to the ends of the earth. Their descendants would build hospitals, orphanages, shelters, refugee centers, and food ministries that would profoundly touch the lives around them.¹ Just seventy people in the beginning, and with faith and courage, they changed the world. Yet still, as a Church, we also have a long way to travel on the road to healing and justice.

Throughout the gospels, we hear that Jesus' twelve disciples were slow to comprehend the message of the God's realm, and they repeatedly failed to live by its principles. So, it seems to me that Jesus is taking quite a risk in commissioning these seventy to go out as his representatives. If the twelve he had chosen to be his closest friends and companions were having trouble grasping the message, how was this lot supposed to get it right? What training did they have? Who was going to supervise them or hold them accountable? How could Jesus be sure they could represent him, or that they would be faithful to his message? Did he test their theology? Had he measured their commitment, or tested

¹ With thanks to the Rev. Dr. David Lose.

their reliability? No. And yet he entrusts them with the message of God's realm and empowers them to heal in his name.

It seems to me that Jesus was willing to take chances. He was willing to place heavenly treasure in fragile earthen vessels. He was willing to turn these seventy people loose, to send them out, to let them speak, without being certain of the outcome. And, not surprisingly, he's still doing that today, sending each of us out to be messengers of that Good News; asking us to be his ambassadors in the world; proclaiming, through us, that "the realm of God has come near to you."

That he chooses these seventy as his messengers is surprising, but even more surprising is the instruction he gives them before sending them out: "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals... Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!'... Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide."

Just as Jesus has taken a risk in choosing these seventy, he now asks them to take a risk by making themselves vulnerable, traveling into the countryside without money or possessions, without reserves of food and drink, without the assurance of safety or shelter or success.

Jesus asks them to go out in weakness rather than in strength. They will need the kindness and generosity of others; and they will be in no position to demand it or purchase it. Jesus seems to want them to know their fragility and their vulnerability. He wants them to rely on God and on each other for their very survival. He seems to believe that their message will be more credible if they approach others in weakness and humility, with nothing to offer except this Good News: "The kingdom of God has come near you."

There is something here for us to learn in this season of our Church's life.

Jesus himself came in weakness rather than in might. He was born in a stable, not a palace. His parents were peasants, not royalty. He chose to be poor rather than rich, weak rather than powerful, faithful rather than successful. He made himself one with the people, identifying especially with the lowly and poor, the outcasts and the marginalized, the powerless and the vulnerable. He did not impose or coerce others, but simply offered mercy, forgiveness, and healing to one and all. He came in love.²

In the same way, Jesus sent these 70 disciples into the world, asking them to be channels of God's love and carriers of God's peace. Jesus took the risk of being vulnerable and he invites his followers to do the same.

The seventy returned from their mission, overjoyed with its success. But Jesus reminds them that success is not the goal. They are to rejoice not so much in what God has accomplished through them, but in the fact that they belong to God.

So, when we experience the power of God at work in us and through us, we're reminded that God's power is most evident in our weakness. We learn to approach the people around us with curiosity and respect, with humility and grace, from a posture of loving service.

So maybe it's time to quit the path of success and instead walk the path of service. If we assume that our church's success is tied to numbers, then we are defining success very narrowly. It's enticing to look back to the "good old days" when our church had so many members that every service was full every Sunday. Those were good seasons of ministry, and we should celebrate them.

And yet it's hard to embrace the future that God has in store for us while trying to recapture the "good old days." Dear friends, this is the season of the church's life when God has brought us together. There's no better time to be church than today, because this is the time that God has called us to be labourers in God's harvest. We have enormous challenges before us, and this is the season of the Church's life that we've been called to go out together and make known the Good News of God's unfailing love, to be agents of mercy, healing, and reconciliation.

² With thanks to Br. David Vryhof, SSJE, July 7, 2019.

Sharing the Good News is an intrinsic part of faithful discipleship. But the freedom of being vulnerable will liberate us. It will liberate us from offering the Good News tainted by desperation for growth in numbers, that awful pressure to “succeed” as a church that has no spiritual integrity and serves our fearful ego far more than the needs of any seeker.

Jesus is alive in us, and we, the Body of Christ, share in his death and resurrection. If we can embrace being the dying Body of Christ, we can know the joy of being the resurrected living Body of Christ. This difficult yet joyfully liberating path of discipleship as the Body of Christ can awaken in us a vitality that is far more compelling and inviting to seekers.

God is on the move through us, and in the fullness of time, God will complete the work God has started in us. Our job in the meantime is to enact God’s reign as Christ’s hands, feet, and body in the world today, acting with confidence that God is with us and is very much alive in our church. We cannot measure the strength or validity of God’s promises based on numbers. But we can allow the promises of our God who created light out of darkness and raised Jesus from the dead to give us confidence and strength for the work that God is calling us to do.

I’m reminded of the old saying, “work like it’s all up to you, and pray like it’s all up to God.” This is the time for us to be bold and throw ourselves into the opportunities and challenges ahead of us with equal measures of delight and resolve, with sure knowledge that God is with us and for us, and to give it our all, knowing that no work done in love is ever lost, and that in time, God will draw all things together for good.

To God be the glory. Amen.