

Texts: Isaiah 66:10-14; Psalm 66:1-9; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11; 16-20

If you were to pack for a mission trip, what do you bring along? Turn to someone sitting near you and talk about that for a minute – what are the essentials that you would have to have?

Now what is on your list of essentials? [toiletries, medications, toothbrush, change of underwear/socks, a book, electronics]

I used to travel a lot for my job. I spent a lot of time in airports and hotels. For a few years, the only kind of work clothing I would buy was the kind that could be packed in a suitcase and not come out wrinkled. I got to be very good at packing light. But I also wonder if I could have managed to do what Jesus asks of his disciples in this gospel passage – to bring nothing. What about you?

Last week we heard Jesus tell some potential disciples that in order to follow him they would have to leave everything behind – home, family and livelihood. Today we hear Jesus telling 70 disciples that they can't even bring anything along with them – no purse, no bag, not even a pair of shoes. It seems daunting, doesn't it? So many of us struggle with the stuff that we have accumulated over the course of our lives. Is Jesus telling us to downsize, to divest?

And the trouble is, that when we think through the implications of what Jesus asks, we tend to turn away. We tend to think that if we can't be a disciple like those 70, we can't be a disciple at all. So why even try?

Jesus does not intend for us to give up. This gospel passage isn't so much about what you have that you can't bring along. This passage is about what God provides when God calls you and sends you into ministry.

Let's look at the passage a bit more closely:

First of all, Luke tells us that Jesus appoints 70 "others" and sends them out ahead of him. Seventy regular folks who were there listening to what he had to say. We often think that the twelve apostles were all that Jesus had to work with. That's probably because Luke tells us their names. But all the gospel writers refer to a larger group of Jesus' followers, including women. It is from that group that Jesus appoints and sends these 70.

Did you know that the average worshipping attendance of an ELCA congregation is 70 people? That's about how many folks come regularly to worship here in a typical month. Here you are, disciples – as many as Jesus worked with back then, he works with now.

Second, Jesus sends these disciples out in pairs. Ministry is not something that you do on your own. There's teamwork in this assignment. Maybe you've heard me say that you can't be a Christian by yourself. It's the same with discipleship – we work together. We work in community. We work in relationship, with God and with each other.

Third, Jesus promises that the harvest is plentiful – so plentiful that there are not enough workers to bring it all in. Jesus is always talking about abundance, rather than scarcity. How much there is, not how little. Worrying about whether our church can be sustained, or whether our denomination can be sustained are the wrong questions. There is work to be done, people who need feeding and healing, people who are lost and who are in desperate need of the good news we bring. Jesus reminds us to be open to God's work that is happening in all sorts of new and surprising ways.

Fourth, Jesus does tell his disciples to travel light. But that's the point. When you don't bring anything of your own along, you have to depend on the kindness of strangers. This is tough news for those of us who want to be helpful, because we tend to think that in order to serve another person, we need to give them something. That's not what Jesus asks of us. Jesus tells his disciples that it's not about what they bring, but what they receive.

It's about becoming vulnerable, allowing someone else take care of you. It's about opening yourself up to another person. Listening to what they have to say, rather than doing all the talking yourself. Receiving what they have to offer you, rather than trying to be the one with all the resources. Maybe you will be welcomed and maybe not. But when you are welcomed, there is a whole new opportunity for friendship.

Finally, Jesus instructs his disciples to proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near. These are Jesus' own words – wherever and whenever God's purpose is being worked out, that is the kingdom of God. Whoever and however God's will is being done, that is the kingdom of God. Whatever Jesus talks about and whatever Jesus does, which he then gives his disciples the power to do as well, the kingdom of God is at hand. When we do what Jesus did – feed the hungry, heal the sick, visit the prisoner, care for the poor – we are doing the work of the kingdom of God.

Just as God sent Jesus into the world, just as Jesus sent his disciples out into their world, Jesus sends us out into our world. Perhaps not all of us are wandering missionaries, who must depend on the hospitality of others for shelter and food, but that doesn't mean we are off the hook. The entire baptized body of Christ is appointed and sent into the world to tell and embody the good news of Jesus Christ. We are all sent to bear Christ to others.

Tomorrow, July 4, we will celebrate this country's independence. We will celebrate the many freedoms that we cherish as American citizens – freedom from tyranny, freedom to govern ourselves, freedom to worship as we wish.

As Christians, we think about freedom in a different way: because we have been freed from the power of sin and death, we are free to be of service. We are free for mission. We are free to proclaim God's reign, God's peace, God's mercy, God's love to everyone we meet.

We do God's work knowing that we are not just independent, but inter-dependent. Seventy disciples, going out two by two. That was just the beginning. Those were just the first to be sent to take God's good news to the ends of the earth. Their descendants continued from there, building churches and hospitals and schools and orphanages and institutions of all kinds that touch lives and proclaim the kingdom of God, up to this very day.

Jesus never said it would be easy. But he also promises us that he will be with us as we go into the harvest field. That harvest field that lies directly on the other side of these walls. Jesus feeds us so that we can feed others. Jesus forgives us so that we can forgive others. Jesus heals our wounds, body and soul, so that we can care for others. And Jesus sends us out so that we can experience the hospitality of others.

In your baptism, you were claimed by God and made a disciple. In this congregation, God has given you partners in ministry. You have everything you need. Now go. Proclaim God's peace. Tell everyone you meet that the kingdom of God has come near. Whoever listens to you hears Jesus' voice.