

“INCLUDED”

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SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – July 4, 2010

Readings: Galatians 6.1-16, Luke 10.1-9

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

I'm going to stop there. You know how the story unfolds – Jesus gives them a bit of advice about how to handle rejection, and then off they go. In the very next passage they are back, covered with success and glory. But today, I want to stop just as they are sent out, these 70 followers, sent out in pairs into the villages and towns of Palestine. At first glance, it seems a very long way from Toronto in July of 2010.

Because of our Sunday school picture of Bible times, we probably imagine plain settings, simple inhabitants – a straightforward encounter between people who share a culture, a religion, and a perspective. But that Sunday school picture isn't really accurate. Ancient Palestine was a complicated, multicultural society, operating on power structures within power structures. There were immigrants from all over the Roman Empire, (and not just in Jerusalem) – soldiers and shopkeepers and bureaucrats and teachers of Greek, and priests of many religions. It was a polyglot society, filled with opportunities for new kinds of living. Even among the locals, the old society was fracturing, under pressures political, economic, and religious. The temple religion of the Jews, with its complex and compromised links to the Empire, was in a process of transformation, as the rabbinic Judaism of the synagogues developed. The poor lived in the grip of what we now call the interlocking oppressions of patriarchal family systems, economic hardship and political domination. But life for the rich wasn't all that straightforward either – complicated as it was by coercion, by corruption, and by the rapidly changing values and ideals. It was a kaleidoscopic world, filled with diversity and challenge.

So, this is beginning to sound familiar. For we too live in a kaleidoscopic world, filled with diversity and challenge. The lovely city pictured on our bulletin cover is the site of immense complexity. Thursday night the sky lighted up with fireworks to express our gratitude for a country so blessed by beauty and so open to the peoples of the world. (Toronto is called the world's most ethnically diverse city by The Economist) Today, the Pride Parade will celebrate another kind of openness – openness to the wonderful variety of ways in which humans are drawn to one another in love. The police will make sure that traffic is kept clear for the parade, and be on hand to protect in case of disturbances or excessive partying. Yet last Sunday, these same police were 'kettling' and arresting scores of people who were demonstrating in favour of maternal health and poverty reduction, apparently unable to distinguish them from violent anarchists. Because of the presence of the G20 delegations, and with some provocation, anxiety seems to have overcome good judgment. It is such a messy, complicated world, a world that poses more questions every day. And as Christians, we are called to be part of that complex world, to get out there, to have something to say about what we find here.

It was this kind of complexity that the writer of the Gospel of Luke wanted to capture by saying it was seventy that Jesus sent out in Palestine that day. The number 70 (or 72 in some versions) is a symbolic way of saying, the whole world, including everyone. They are to go and talk to the poor and to the rich, the slaves and servants, and the powerful, talk to the men, the women, and the children. They were supposed to talk to strangers – the strangers who had come to rule and the strangers who had come to escape. So we may well imagine that they were, as we are, at a loss as to how exactly to relate their conviction of God's love and their experience of Jesus to this complicated, and let's face it, mostly indifferent, world.

Today's Gospel lesson is about the strategy Jesus recommends for this difficult task:

Go in pairs, he says. Stay connected with someone to talk to who does understand where you are coming from.

Be aware that it is not so easy – not just sweet intelligent us in a benign and grateful world. You are lambs among wolves, he says. Probably for us, the

wolves of distraction, and materialism, and the desire to seem important. Those are the wolves that may eat us up.

Go in simplicity. Don't take a lot of gear, just go, just be there. As we say, don't just do something, stand there.

Offer a blessing, Jesus advises. Say, may you have peace. Keep on offering it, he says – if it doesn't 'take', the blessing will come back to you.

Connect with the people you go to – stay in their place, eat their food and drink their drink. Try to find out about them, and get to know them. Have an attitude of respectful curiosity. If your presence can bring healing, wonderful.

Finally, the hardest one for us, for all liberal moderns who squirm at the word *evangelism*, Jesus says, 'Say to them, the Kingdom of God has come near to you.'

Well, we might want to use other words, and speak a slightly different language. But that *is* the gist of what we want to say to those we encounter in the complex world we live in. We want to say, 'There is a different reality here, another truth, and it is operating right now.' As followers of Jesus, we are drawn to that different reality, we belong to it. In that reality, that kingdom, all are included. In that truth, the boundaries that we live by are abolished. In that reality our obsessions do not control us, our small-mindedness does not enslave us, our lovelessness no longer binds us.

But the kingdom Jesus speaks of is God's reality, not ours, and in truth, we only have a glimpse of it. In that reality we are servants, not owners. We are learners, not teachers.

This is the table where we celebrate that reality, that kingdom. We are the wait staff at this feast to which the host has invited everyone. We are both guests and servants at the shared meal in which all are included.

Let us pray:

Loving God, we give you thanks that your love reaches beyond us, and invites us to a feast at which all are included. Amen.