

Workers in the Kingdom

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Have you ever worked in the fields? It seems to me some of the hardest work I have ever done. I grew up on my grandparents' farm in a little town called Wardell in Southeastern Missouri. When we weren't working our own farm we worked for others. There were crops that required immediate attention; like cucumbers, strawberries, and okra. On our farm there was alfalfa, corn and cotton to be harvested, along with my mother's vegetable garden. The harvest must be done when the produce is ready. There can be no delay or the produce will die on the vine. The work days on other farms were 10 to 12 hours in the hot sun. On our farm it was sun up to sun down! That was the reason many families migrated to Northern industrial cities to get away from the back-breaking labor of the harvest.

In our scripture seventy apostles were sent to go ahead of Jesus into the towns to prepare the way for him, as part of the harvest. There was a sense of urgency, with Jesus asking the disciples to pray for more laborers for the harvest, because it is plentiful and the laborers are few (vv. 2-3). Jesus sent them with a mission of preaching, teaching, and healing with the same authority for these ministries that Jesus himself had. The gospel of peace took the seventy into direct conflict with Satan, whose power fell before the divine mission (10:17-20). Even so, they were to go peaceably, with the message that the kingdom of God is near. They were to be like "lambs among wolves."

Having authority meant having the courage and freedom to go forth in vulnerability and intentional poverty, to travel lightly, and to depend on the hospitality of others. It meant a nonviolent response to rejection at the hands of others. All of their actions were done to prepare others to receive Jesus. When the

apostles saw the power of God manifested in their ministry, they were not to rejoice over their apostolic role, but rather because their names are written in heaven.

The peace the apostles offered was more than a greeting. Peace represented the kingdom of God, the salvation that is *shalom*. This peace causes conflict because it arouses the hostility of demonic powers. At times the apostles felt as they were walking among "snakes and scorpions" (v. 19), because of the violent reaction against the gospel. However, they were given the power to resist these forces, shaking the dust from their feet in response.

The role of hospitality was essential to their mission cannot be overstated. The hospitality of the seventy was shown in their mission of peace, where they gave up all forms of exploitation, self-centeredness, and personal gain. They were not to consider how much they would earn, how and where they would be housed, not even what and how their food would be prepared. Their single purpose was to prepare others to encounter Jesus. This was done peacefully, through grateful presence and conversation. The apostles were to be relational and respectful in order to be invited into others' homes, where they shared the gospel of the kingdom of God.

The hospitality of those to whom the apostles were sent was an openness to hear and respond to the gospel. If the apostles are truly representative of Jesus, they could expect a positive response from many, for the harvest is plentiful and ready, Jesus said. What was lacking was laborers who were prepared to go forth.

Elaine A. Heath

Today we rejoice that the authority of Jesus' name is still the powerful means by which our lives are transformed. The seventy messengers may have long since died, but God continues to call new evangelists, teachers, and preachers to share the message of the gospel. Even now, the nature of the messenger is not the

essential factor, for even ordinary Christians who are living out their lives of faith are empowered to share the word of God and to encourage others to believe and follow. We church must be aware that the message, not the messenger, is the focus of our existence. Our world is bigger, we are two thousand years removed from Jesus' walk on earth, and our use of technology for communication is widespread; yet the power to encourage others to hear, change heart, and submit is still in the name of the one we call Lord.

The instructions Jesus gave to his seventy messengers were remarkably specific and left little doubt that their task could prove difficult. He encouraged them to take only what they were wearing and to carry nothing with them. There was to be no distraction from the main intent of their visit. They were to stay in one house and eat what was provided. Hospitality was to be accepted, and a blessing offered in return. Their work was to offer peace, and share the news that the kingdom of God was near. Their focus was to be on the gifts that came from God, not on the personalities of the messengers who brought them.

The message that these servants of God brought to the people of the towns and villages was essential and immediate. They preached that the kingdom of God was important to all, both those who received them and those who did not. With the power to transform lives, the kingdom would be realized soon in the presence of Jesus Christ, who both traveled the countryside and commissioned those who spoke in his name. They were vitally concerned with the imminence of that message. This was not a time to delay, but a time for decision.

For many of us believers, the immediacy of the kingdom dims with the passage of time. We live within parameters that we can see, touch, and feel. The coming of the kingdom demands a change in our perspective. Whether that means living in the presence of Christ today or living with him in the hereafter, we must begin to see the challenges of life through a lens provided by God, rather than from our

human perspective. Time numbs us. The passing of each year leads us away from the promise of the coming kingdom, and dims our sense of expectation.

As messengers, we have a powerful calling. The Lord appoints us to go out into the world ahead of him. We are not to find on our own a way to live in Jesus' footsteps; instead, we are given specific instructions to share the good news with vitality and anticipation. No longer is the burden of persuasion on us, for we are not the focus. Now, very clearly the focus of our message is on the coming of Christ and our call to live each day in his name. Our authority is not in our status, possessions, or abilities; but, like those first messengers, we are to encourage everyone to follow and submit in the name of our Lord. That power is already attested by the seventy who "returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'" (v. 17). As present-day messengers, that joy is ours as well, for we have been appointed by Christ to share the good news of the coming of the kingdom. We are workers in the kingdom. This is not the work of my youth, but the work of sharing the Good News of Jesus with someone we know; a child, a friend, a neighbor, a family member. Our task is to prepare them to know Jesus by the way we treat them, how we encourage them, how we love them. We help them to know Jesus. Then we can rejoice, not in the power of our accomplishments, but in the knowledge that our "names are written in heaven" (v. 20) by the one whose name is the most powerful of all. **Richard J. Shaffer Jr.**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Proper 3-16).