

**Sermon**  
**St. Paul's Episcopal Church**  
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**July 7, 2019**

Isaiah 66:10-14  
Psalm 66:1-8  
Galatians 6:(1-6)7-16  
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

**From today's gospel: "Go on your way...cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near.'"**

"Go on your way" Jesus says in today's gospel. We know from last week's gospel, which came from the chapter in Luke right before today's reading, that Jesus himself is going on his way – he has set out on his final, fateful journey to Jerusalem. In today's reading, which is sometimes referred to as the "Mission of the Seventy," Jesus has gathered, not the usual twelve, but seventy of his followers to travel ahead of him to the towns he will soon enter on his way. These seventy are sort of like mini John the Baptists sent to prepare the way for Jesus. His instructions to these folks sound a lot like what he had also told his inner circle of twelve earlier in his ministry, but now Jesus expands well beyond that group, granting authority to and commissioning quite a large number of people.

While there is a lot of detail in this passage about Jesus' instructions to this group—how to travel, what to take, what to eat, what to say—there is quite a bit that we don't know. Who were these people—had they followed him from Galilee, or had they joined him along the way? What towns did they actually go to, and what, specifically, did they do there? What did they do after they returned to Jesus? How did he choose them, and why 70 of them?

Since this story is told only in Luke and not in any of the other Gospels, we don't have other sources to help us answer most of these questions. But, perhaps the vagueness about who these people were and what they did is intentional on Luke's part. Perhaps this group of 70 is meant to symbolize something broader. We know that in scripture the number 7 (including multiples of 7) is used to indicate something like "completeness." For instance, the story in Genesis 1 describes the process of creation as being completed in 7 days. We also know that Jesus insisted that we forgive others not 7 times, but "seventy times seven" times—meaning, as many times as it takes to achieve or "complete" the process of forgiveness. So, in this story, the sending forth of 70 people by Jesus may indicate that Jesus' message, in order to be complete, needs to go beyond just the inner circle of twelve, it needs to be more expansive. Jesus' sending of 70 signals that his gospel is meant to reach beyond the Jews to the Gentiles, beyond the "insiders" to reach the "outsiders"— it says that the good news of God's love is meant for everyone.

And what about all those instructions? As I said before, there is a lot more focus on Jesus' instructions to the 70 than on what they actually do. So maybe there's something in those instructions that we need to pay attention to--let's take a look.

First of all, Jesus calls them, he "appoints" them, and says "go on your way." This is not a call simply to believe in Jesus or even to follow him, it's a call to get up and do something. It's a plea for action. And the only specific action Jesus commands them to take is to cure the sick—this is a very practical action, something that can make a profound impact on the life of an individual.

Jesus also encourages them to go forward in pairs, providing support and security for each other as they venture out. And he asks them to proceed with vulnerability and humility. They are to take very little and must rely on the hospitality of strangers. And they are not to place themselves above others; they must speak the truth, but not with anger or retaliation.

So, again, here's what Jesus says to those 70 people:

Go, do something.

Do something that eases suffering in the life of another.

Do something that shows that God's kingdom has come near.

Let yourself be vulnerable, serving others with humility.

I saw examples of all of this advice in action just last month on the sad occasion of the memorial service for my brother-in-law Jim. Jim, the 59-year-old husband of my youngest sister, Jennifer, had struggled with cancer for over three years, and he passed away in late May. In the days leading up to his service and during the event itself, I witnessed so many wonderful examples of people doing exactly what Jesus asked those 70 to do. People did things—often just small things, but they made an enormous difference for my sister. The simple act of Jennifer's neighbor picking up the centerpieces for the tables at the reception and all the other items Jen had pulled together, took the pressure off my sister so she could stop worrying about all the little details and prepare herself emotionally. When Jennifer's childhood friends said they were going to do all the baking and setup for the dessert table, their action demonstrated the love and ongoing support they have for my sister. When Jim's mother insisted that the extended family join her the night before the service for their traditional Italian dinner of mounds of homemade pasta and two kinds of lovingly prepared sauce, her humble act of cooking and serving her family was a profound expression of love. And, most of all, on the day of the service, people came. They heeded the call to "go," to show their love of Jim and to support his family; even if they didn't know what to do or to say in the face of this sadness, they came. Some came in pairs, some in groups, and some alone, but they showed up. I think attending any kind of funeral or memorial service is not only an act of love, but it also involves some vulnerability. These events can make us uncomfortable as they force us to confront our own mortality, to reflect on our own lives, and to admit that we don't have explanations for why life and death unfold the way they do. But people came, they expressed their love of Jim and support for the family, they both lovingly gave and humbly accepted hospitality, they took action to help ease the suffering of all who mourned Jim's passing.

So the people I encountered over the days surrounding Jim's service truly lived out the instructions Jesus gives to the 70 in today's gospel. These 70 folks are never named and never reappear in the gospel—so, again, who are they? Who is this group that is meant to include all types of people, to expand beyond the lines that can divide us? This group is us—we are the 70—Jesus is talking to *us*. In our baptism we have been given both the authority and the responsibility to “go forward,” called by Jesus to serve others with vulnerability and humility.

Let's listen again to some of the promises we make whenever we renew our Baptismal Covenant. We promise to:

“proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ”

“seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself”

“strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being”

So, yes, we are the 70. But we're not some special, elite group—God's grace and love encompass all of creation, without boundary or division—that's what the number 70 tells us.

When the 70 in our story today return to Jesus after they have “gone forth,” they are delighted and seem somewhat surprised by their success. I'm not sure they knew what they were getting into, and I don't think they really expected to have the kind of impact that they did. Perhaps they thought their actions were too small or that they didn't have the ability to do anything significant. I'm sure that when my sister's friends did things like bake cakes and pick up centerpieces, they had no idea how meaningful these acts were. But, that's just it—even small acts of love can make a big difference. If we heed Jesus' call to “go forward” and help others, we may be surprised at the difference we can make.

As we “go forward” from this place today, let us each ask what we might be called to do, whether in pairs or groups or all on our own. What suffering might we be able to ease this week? To whom might we reach out? What steps might we take to help our family or friends or those we don't even know? What vulnerable, humble acts of service can we do to show that yes, indeed, the kingdom of God has come near?