

Pentecost VI

'Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.' Luke 10: 20

I try to imagine this scene. I try to imagine being one of those seventy others Jesus appointed to send out: his advance men and women. And what do I see: urgency, confusion, fear, excitement, challenge!

Jesus' mission has expanded: he can't handle all the work of mission himself, nor are the Twelve sufficient any longer. He plans to visit *every town and place* where he's sending these new recruits – truly, not unlike a political campaign as we know it today, where the team goes to prepare the way for the candidate's arrival, charismatic speech, pressing the flesh, and departure for the next site.

But Jesus' time is limited. He is always aware that he is moving further into danger, further toward his destiny, and he is pressed, evidently, with the need for efficiency. So he drafts 70 new converts and sends them out in pairs to prepare a way for him. And he gives them a rapid-fire series of instructions before they set out.

It's a vivid, complex passage, with its first-century shorthand for evangelism. And, as I said a few weeks ago about the reading where Jesus says, *A prophet is not without honor except in his own country*, it's a passage to delight an unhappy preacher. But what about a happy one? And beyond that question, I wonder what we make, today, of Jesus' orders to the Seventy? Are they relevant? Applicable to our own lives and work?

Some Christians, I know, find the template problematic, if not offensive. The commissioning of the seventy extends the Jesus' project beyond the Twelve. Proclamation is the responsibility of all disciples — not just a select few. How do we feel about this? Are we disappointed to realize we are not among the select few? Do we feel rebuked if we prefer not to get involved in the work of mission and ministry? Would we rather be observers only, or recipients, rather than messengers of the Good News?

And seventy are to go in pairs to neighboring towns in an aggressive outreach program. We think of Mormons, maybe, or Jehovah's Witnesses. Good people perhaps, but not our people, not our style of ministry.

But let's remember how we, most of us, understand Scripture in the Episcopal Church. We don't take everything literally. We believe Scripture to be the word of God *interpreted by humans*, and we comprehend that much of what made sense in other times and places— the urgency of harvest time in an agricultural economy, for instance— is not so relevant to us today.

So, are we evangelizing when we talk to a stranger in J.P Licks about the family-friendly church we attend? When we stand at the State House holding signs and banners attesting to God's love for LGBT people? Is that our particular, 21st century form of outreach? And how can we expand that outreach, and our understanding of it?

A week ago yesterday I celebrated the marriage of two young men at Emmanuel Church on Newbury Street. They had come to me by way of my friend John McDargh, a professor at Boston College, whom many of you know. One had a Roman Catholic background, the other Lutheran, I believe, and while they have not been church attenders recently they were very clear that they wanted a church wedding, Eucharist and all.

This was the second wedding I'd officiated at since the June 14 marriage equality victory, the first same-sex marriage. For that reason, it felt especially meaningful to me. And it was a lovely service aesthetically – the music, the readings, the guys themselves, the setting in the Lindsay Chapel. Part of me was standing apart, looking at the proceedings, thinking, this is *beautiful!*

But a couple of things stood out in particular. One was that almost every person in the congregation came up to receive communion, and a couple to receive a blessing. That so rarely happens – except when we've had marriages here during the Sunday liturgy. My message of welcome and inclusion evidently was clear, and was heard.

Afterwards at the reception, a young man came up to me and said this. “ I live in Rhode Island, and I've been very involved in marriage equality work there. I was raised Roman Catholic and went to Mass every Sunday for 18 years. Now I no longer go because I'm gay and I'm not welcome. I have a long -term boyfriend, and I hope we will get married someday. Until today, I could never imagine having God involved in my marriage service. Now, I can't imagine *not*. “

Now, this wedding and its aftermath would not have been comprehensible to Jesus, I have no doubt. It was not the kind of event at which he turned water into wine. And yet, that miracle at Cana was, according to John, Jesus' first miracle, his first demonstration of his extraordinary power. And the wedding at Emmanuel Church and its effect on this young man from Rhode Island seemed like a bit of a miracle too – and certainly a demonstration of the mighty power of Jesus and the deep and abiding need many people have for divine love and sanction.

Many of you know that I was in New York the week before that wedding, meeting with folks from around the country concerned with the larger Church's inclusion of LGBT people, and with a representative from the Anglican Communion preparing a study resource for the Bishops' meeting at Lambeth next year. (The Lambeth Conference occurs every 10 years in the Anglican Communion, and has great symbolic weight, if functionally not so much.)

The conversation was extremely frustrating for many reasons. Briefly, I would say, we would tell stories of our personal or corporate lives in the Church and get a response from “the facilitator of the Anglican Communion Listening Process” that went something like this: *the Bishops will need to hear X*. (X sometimes being what one of us had just passionately said, reduced to a formula. Or X being something entirely unrelated to our concerns) *Can you provide documentation? An abstract?*

Somehow, I can't imagine those Seventy commissioned by Jesus in today's Gospel going forth with documentation and abstracts. No academic articles for them, no CD Roms. They went with their raw experience, their excitement, their apprehensions about how they would be received in unknown territory. They went with stories of their own conversions, their narratives of having been healed and set on fire by God's love, their witness to the power of Jesus. The same stories we were telling to “the facilitator of the Anglican Communion Listening Process.” Who seemed to have a hard time listening, or hearing, or responding humanely, or all three.

So we did resemble those Seventy, in some pretty basic ways. Were we, as Jesus says to the newly commissioned, *lambs in the midst of wolves*? Probably not – all of us were old hands in the ways of the institutional Church. As folks kept pointing out, Lambeth has been promising to listen to the voices of LGBT people since 1978, and hasn't succeeded yet.

So should we, as Jesus also tells the Seventy, *wipe off the dust that clings to our feet in protest*? It's tempting, and as I said to the friend who invited me to the

conversations, at the end of the two days, “I’m either going to run from the room, or run screaming from the room.” He suggested silent running, and I complied. Screaming seemed attractive because at the end, when we were supposed to have finished, we found ourselves discussing whether any of our material would in fact get to the Bishops at all. Why was this not the first question, instead of the last?

But if we wipe the dust from our feet, where will we be? Where will the Church be? Because the Church needs us, if it is to be the Church, if it is to be the bearer of the Good News of God’s all-embracing love and Jesus’ enduring power. And if we keep on witnessing, if we keep on telling our stories with passion and conviction, I have no doubt that we will win hearts and change minds. We know this from the marriage equality struggle. And while it may be discouraging, if not scandalous, that the Massachusetts legislature seems more susceptible to conversion than some of the Bishops of our Church, still, our victory here gives us hope. Jesus does not tell the Seventy it will be easy.

I asked some of you to give me thoughts to take with me to those meetings in New York. Here’s some of what Marcus Butler wrote.

I think you are really onto the right track when you speak to the experience “on the ground” of radical inclusion. To be honest, I think many people who have not experienced it might think that it is something rather exotic. While that is true, in a way, it is also profoundly untrue. Inclusion is also rather mundane—it looks and feels normal, like life as it is. Our parish is not particularly “out there.” We have our internal struggles with parish politics, our struggles with a failing physical plant, and our joy in experiencing the rebirth of the church filled with children----some of which are kids of gay parents, but most of which are traditional families.

It occurs to me that the inclusion of gays and lesbians is absolutely essential, in our culture, to demonstrate that a church is a church about a loving, inclusive God. Why? Because it is so much easier than tackling even more difficult and complicated issues such as poverty and immigration.

Now, that’s evangelism, to my mind. That’s a message worthy of taking on the road – wherever the road may lead us individually and corporately. And if we keep proclaiming our message of Good News, I have faith that the demons of homophobia and heterosexism and eventually even the demons of Church politics will submit to the power of love. And what does Jesus have to say about that?

He says, *“I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”*

Alleluia! Amen.