

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
July 12, 2009  
Pentecost 6  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Amos 7:7-15  
Psalm 85:7-13  
Ephesians 1:1-14  
Mark 6:7-13

Our Gospel lesson this morning finds Jesus gathering his disciples together and sending them out as an extension of his own ministry. You will recall that very early in this Gospel, Jesus arrives on the scene in chapter one and says, “the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the Gospel” (1:15).

Now, he gathers his followers to himself, pairs them up, and sends them into Galilee with instructions to sound forth that same message, to call on people to repent and to change the course of their lives. They are to be Jesus’ ambassadors. They are to be an extension of his voice. They are to be his hands, his feet, his eyes and ears in the world. The ministry -- *Jesus’* ministry -- is to continue.

The disciples discover, however, that ministry in Jesus’ name -- in spite of its high moments -- can also be a daunting and even dangerous task.

The daunting nature of ministry is seen in Jesus’ experience in his hometown of Nazareth, the story of which is told immediately prior to our text this morning. After a series of encounters where Jesus’ message is met with great approval, the message (and the messenger) at Nazareth are met with resistance, hostility, and outright rejection.

The dangerous nature of ministry can be seen in the story that immediately follows our lesson today, where John the Baptist is executed because of his proclamation of the message of repentance.

So, while it is an amazing thing that Jesus solicits the help of his disciples to carry out the Father's will, ministry in Jesus' name must not be idealized or romanticized. This is as true for followers of Jesus *today* as it was for followers of Jesus then.

We know that ministry in 2009 can be a daunting challenge because the reality is that for all those who accept the message of repentance, there are countless others who reject the message. For all those who believe, there are countless others who do *not* believe. For all those who turn their lives in a different direction, there are countless others who continue down the same rebellious, destructive path.

And although we don't have first hand experience of it, we also know that ministry can be dangerous and even deadly in our world. In the few minutes that pass while we worship here today, somewhere in the world there are followers of Jesus who will lose their lives because of their testimony.

It's a daunting challenge to extend Jesus' message into a broken and hurting world. It's an enormous task to be his ambassadors, to pray and to work for healing and reconciliation.

Is there anything from this text that might help us on our journey?

I believe there is.

I believe the daunting and challenging task of carrying on Jesus' work is best accomplished when we think of ministry in terms of "we" and not "me."

I believe that one reason Jesus dispatched the disciples in pairs instead of individually was to show that ministry is something assigned to the *Church*, the community of faith, the Body of Christ.

Ministry in the Name of Jesus is a corporate task. The Holy Spirit is not my private possession, nor yours. The Holy Spirit is Christ's gift to the Church, not just individuals. In a culture which places the individual at the center of life and reality, this notion sounds foreign. But it is true. Jesus has called the *church* to continue his ministry, not Lone Rangers or Rugged Individualists.

Because ministry is a communal task, it protects us from two temptations:

First, it safeguards us from the temptation to be disobedient and unfaithful. The temptation to fall away or to compromise is more readily resisted. There is a built-in accountability and strength in numbers.

Think of the disciples going out two by two. One disciple is less prone to go off and do something halfcocked because he is accountable to the other. He is less prone to give in to temptation in a moment of weakness because his comrade is there with him.

A second safeguard of the corporate nature of ministry is that it strengthens us in those times when we are discouraged and tempted to give up.

We've learned in recent weeks from the apostle Paul that following Jesus is the best way, but not always the *easiest* way. Carrying on Jesus' work in the world can sometimes be a difficult task. Discouragement is always an ever-present possibility.

But let us remember that ministry must be thought of in terms of "us," not "I." Christ's ministry is a task given to the whole Church. I'm not in this alone, and neither are all of you.

So in those times when we are tempted to be discouraged, and in those times when we are weary from the work we've been given to do, let us remember that we are part of something much bigger than the little part we've been given to play. The Church of Jesus Christ is rolling onward and forward. The gates of hell cannot prevail against her. The Church will not quit or go away. Therefore, I will not quit, either.

How do we carry on Jesus' work in the world? We do it in complete dependence upon the Holy Spirit. And we do it *together*. Corporately and communally. We do it with the understanding that ministry is always in the plural, always in the language of "us," and "we," even when we are acting by ourselves.

These two insights help us as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table this morning. For as Christ feeds us here with bread and wine, we are reminded of our utter dependence upon God for all of life, including the ministry we've been given.

Feeding on this heavenly bread calls to mind the children of Israel being sustained daily by the manna from heaven, and reminds us that we are nurtured and fed daily by God's gracious hand. The Eucharist shatters our illusions of self-reliance and independence.

In addition, the Eucharist reminds us that we are not a collection of lone rangers. We are in this together. We are the Church, Christ's Body. Feeding on these elements reminds us that the work of Jesus which we carry forward in the world is done in terms of "us" and not "me."

Let us come, then, with grateful hearts, with the assurance that Christ's work is going forward in our world, as we depend upon the Holy Spirit, and as we do it together.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.