

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

July 7, 2019

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Church of the Holy Cross

2 Kings 5:1-14

Psalm 30

Galatians 6 (1-6) 7-16

Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

What Are You Prepared To Do?

This past week, I was offered a chance to take my 15-year-old goddaughter niece to see the musical “Hamilton.” It seems her father made a mistake on the date when buying a pair of tickets, so he couldn’t take her as planned. And she REALLY wanted to see this show. It wasn’t entirely convenient for me, so I had to ask myself, “What are you prepared to do?” Quite a bit, as it turned out: I used two days of vacation time. I drove to the Eastern Shore to pick her up, turned around and drove immediately to Baltimore, where I paid for a hotel room for the night, bought her a couple of meals, and got up at 6 AM (after the show ran until 11 the night before) to drive her BACK to the Eastern Shore—on the third of July, mind you—so she could be on time for a beach trip with friends. And then I had to drive back home alone—no beach trip for me! But I was prepared to do all that because the end was important to me; it matters to me that I give Maddie time, attention, and memorable experiences. The importance of the end shaped what I was prepared to do.

I thought of this when I reread the story of Naaman in 2 Kings. Longing to be healed of his leprosy, this great commander and mighty warrior has traveled to a foreign land with a huge number of gifts for a foreign king—and with his own pride. He is shooed away from the palace to the doorstep of the prophet Elisha, who sends a servant to tell Naaman what he must do to be made clean, a gesture that enrages the great man. But as he is about to walk away, carrying his pride, his anger, and his disease, his own servants ask a question that we can paraphrase as: What are you prepared to do? Having already done so much to gain this thing of great importance, what are you prepared to do? The value of the end shapes what Naaman is prepared to do.

So, I came to today’s Gospel reading from Luke, in which Jesus sends his followers out in pairs to spread his message about the Kingdom of God, with that question in my mind. And approaching this passage from that point of view highlighted two points that strike me as important as we try to find meaning in it for ourselves.

First, Jesus doesn’t send only the apostles, the chosen few who are closest to him, out to do this work. He sends 70 people from his crowd of disciples, indicating that this work is for ALL followers of Jesus. To put this in terms of our church structure, Jesus is not sending out bishops—those consecrated in an unbroken chain of succession from the original 12 apostles. He is not sending out ordained clergy. He is sending out lay people. He is sending out US, you and me. And that work, sharing Christ’s message to the world, is called evangelism. This is described in clear, simple terms in a recent book from Forward Movement, the Episcopal publisher, called *Walk in Love: Episcopal Beliefs and Practices*. Outlining the ministries of bishops, priests,

deacons, and lay people, the authors say the “laity are called to communicate Jesus Christ, in word and deed, in ways great and small, in their daily lives in the world.”

And the second point that I find important is this: in today’s lesson and many other places in the Gospels, Jesus makes it plain that this will not be easy work, that a life of evangelism will require sacrifices. In today’s lesson, Jesus tells his followers that some villages will reject their message and drive them away; elsewhere, he warns them that they may give up family ties, friendships, wealth, homes, even their lives, in order to follow him. Again and again, in varying words, he asks potential followers the question: What are you prepared to do? The importance of this work—outweighing all other values in their lives—shapes what they are prepared to do.

We are blessed to live in a time and place in which we are unlikely to face the sacrifices of the original followers of Jesus as they carried out the work of evangelism. Others may reject our message, but we don’t live in one of the 144 countries, as of 2016, in which Christians are persecuted because of their beliefs, according to a Pew Research Center study that the Church of England’s Bishop of Truro cited in his interim report on persecuted Christians published at Easter. Christians in North Korea, Sri Lanka, parts of India, and large swaths of Africa are prepared to risk their lives in the practice of their faith “in their daily lives in the world.” We don’t face that kind of danger. Nor do we run much risk of arrest, imprisonment, sectarian attack, loss of livelihood, church closures, or other types of government or social harassment merely for being Christians.

So, what gets in our way? Why is it that many of us are reluctant to proclaim Christ, to cite our faith as the reason for what we do in our daily lives? Perhaps we see “Christian” and “evangelism” as words that have become associated with exclusivity, bias, discrimination, and other violations of the values Jesus exemplified. Maybe we have become so focused on loving our neighbors that we forget that part of Jesus’ message to the 70 was to hold others accountable for behavior, to shake off the dust from their feet in places that reject the Kingdom of God. Perhaps we think that ordained clergy must lead us in this work, forgetting that, in sending out ordinary disciples, Jesus not only allows but encourages us to see this work as our own. Maybe, as Brother Lucas Hall of the Society of Saint James the Evangelist recently wrote, “our resting places [in God] have become places of fear, complacency, or stagnation...caves from which God calls us and asks, ‘What are you doing here?’” Maybe we just find the world and our lives so overwhelming that we have lost our way and have no idea where to begin. If we are to be true followers of Christ, however, none of these obstacles should matter; it is the importance of the Kingdom of God that should shape what we are prepared to do.

There is a part of our liturgy that has become a touchstone for me when I need reminding that I am called to act in the world: our prayers of confession. In the confession that we use most of the church year, we repent not only for any wrong things we have done, but for the work that we have left undone. And in the version of confession we’re praying this summer, I’m particularly struck by the call to repent of the evil done on our behalf; even if I think my own acts have been exemplary (spoiler alert: they’re not), there is plenty of collective evil to confess, to atone for, and to correct. And so I look myself in the mirror and ask, “What are you prepared to do?”

About poverty, homelessness, and hunger in our neighborhood, our country, and around the world. About the inequalities in opportunity of our global economic system. About crime and violence that drive people to leave their homes in desperate searches for a safer life. About children in detention camps, prisoners of conscience, ethnic minorities facing genocide. About

all the “isms” that target those who are not like us, whom we see as “other.” About disease and needless deaths because medicines aren’t available or affordable. About addictions, mental illness, and the isolation in our seemingly connected world that leads some to take their own lives in despair and loneliness. About the environmental destruction we’ve wrought upon the earth. About waste, pollution, greed, and overuse of resources. Sadly, I could go on and on. These are the demons we face.

If you think I’ll now give you answers, I’m sorry to disappoint you. I can’t answer my own question in regard to every problem on this list; that is an everlasting process of thought, prayer, and discernment. And even if I could, my answers wouldn’t necessarily be your answers, because Christ calls us all to our own work, using our specific gifts. Denise called on us last week to “lean in.” I suggest, brothers and sisters, that a good place to start is to join me in asking the question, “What are you prepared to do?”

Amen.