

An Abundant Harvest

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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July 4, 2010

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Amen.

Birthdays are often occasions in which to celebrate life, to reminisce about growing up and to take stock of where we are and where we want to go. To put it more simply, birthdays invite our self-reflection. While such reflective behavior may be relatively easy for the average person to undertake, the same task is considerably more difficult for a community and almost impossible for a nation to accomplish. The “Fourth of July,” which we celebrate today on our secular calendar, helps us pause and be grateful for the opportunity to reside in a country founded on principles of equality and freedom. Our nation has, indeed, reaped an abundant harvest. Our supermarkets are stacked to their ceilings with food. We enjoy freedoms of speech, press and assembly, to name just a few. We are blessed with numerous resources, with immeasurable talents and with significant strengths. Yet, we are also deeply aware (or at least we should be deeply aware), that within this nation there are also weaknesses to be found and by weaknesses we do not mean differences in opinion despite what the liberal and conservative commentators would have us believe. Our national frailty and, in some sense, our national failure is rooted in the definite but stark reality that not everyone shares equally in the abundance given to our land by God. As a nation and as a people, we still must grapple with appalling poverty, with ghastly prejudices, and with gross abuses of power. We measure our abundance or lack thereof in such anemic terms as wealth, security and political influence. Oppression and discord, whether intentionally or unintentionally, are frequently the by-products of our quest for an abundant personal and national life. With that being said, the United States of America is not peculiar among the nations, nor are Americans peculiar among the peoples in our faltering ability to manufacture abundance, peace or any of the other virtues.

This morning’s gospel reading, far from being concerned with any nation in particular, focuses not a country but on a kingdom. According to Saint Luke, this kingdom is “of God” and the kingdom is at hand. In other words, the kingdom of which the gospel writer speaks is, at this very moment, a present reality in our midst. The rule of God is breaking into our world, manifesting itself by the power of the cross operating within the lives of Christ’s followers. Within today’s gospel text, Jesus’ commissions a sum-total of seventy-two disciples. They are a nameless group. We know nothing about them. We do not know where they come from. We know nothing of their previous employment, let alone, their ages or their gender. They could be anybody or everybody which is perhaps Saint Luke’s point. They are a generous cross-section of humanity into which the more imaginative among us can read ourselves. Their very presence, though relatively nondescript, reminds us that the ministry of the kingdom and therefore the ministry of Christ can never be seen as the privilege and preserve of a select few, even should those few be as well known as, say, the twelve apostles. Nor, would it seem, can ministry be watered-down simply to those sacrifices made by some oddly conceived

spiritual elite, rather, ministry must be undertaken by all who consider themselves disciples. Such discipleship, however, will be undeniably costly. If we are going to follow Christ then we must follow him into his death for it is only by his death and resurrection that the kingdom ultimately comes. The unvarnished and difficult truth is that we must become last, least, lost and dead with him. Christ emphasizes this point by sending these nameless disciples into every town and place where he himself is about to go. "The harvest is abundant" he tells them, "but the laborers are few." As well they should be. One can hardly expect a plentiful supply of laborers when the one for whom they are laboring has set his face toward Jerusalem and thus is determined to get Himself killed by the powers that be. To further complicate matters, Jesus tells his disciples that, insofar as the world is concerned, their labors, their ministry on his behalf, will be pointless. Their mission, much like that of Don Quixote tilting at windmills, will seem to be little more than a tragic nonsense. They will be as lambs in the midst of wolves. In other words, as Christ's followers, as his sheep, our identity will be rooted in how well we conform our lives to Christ's lost-ness, to his forsakenness, to his willingness when faced with the world's unstinting wolfishness, to become someone else's dinner. To reinforce this understanding of who we are to be, Christ commands us to take no money, no charge cards, no Vera Wang bags or any other type of purse. We are not even to think of packing a suitcase. We are to leave our sneakers safely at home, tucked away into the back of our closets. We are simply to go, with the strange caveat not to talk to anyone on the road as we journey forth. Christ sends us out, devoid of all the usual trapping of status and power with which we like to surround ourselves. His marching orders wondrously render us, in both our insignificance and in our equality, as little more than corpses on their way to a burial. Should we arrive at someone's house, he tells us, we are simply to wish the house and those that abide within its walls, peace. We are to stay there, eating, drinking and doing whatever comes along. In a very real sense, we are to become empty vessels, open and receptive, waiting to be filled to the brim with the lost-ness and least-ness of Jesus. By emptying ourselves, by dying to ourselves and thus dying into the death and resurrection of Jesus, we discover that what is lost is always found, what is least is always great, what is dead is always alive and what seems to be scarce is, in fact, abundant, fulfilling and fruitful.

By dying to self, our lives bear witness to the kingdom; a kingdom defined, by the very pattern of the cross. Christ takes this understanding of the kingdom one step further. He tells the seventy-two nameless disciples that, in the all too likely event their erstwhile hosts toss them to the curb as nothing more than a bunch of free-loading vagabonds, they are simply to shake the dust from their feet and inform these self-righteous and inveterate winners that they have lost out on the kingdom of God. Notice that Christ gives his disciples no command to call down fire upon the opposition, nor are they to curse the ground upon which they walk. Christ will not allow them or us to answer such inhospitality by being inhospitable ourselves. In humility, we are simply to state the truth of the gospel even when such truth may not be understood. The gospel which we preach, through our words and actions, must always be invitational. People can not be brow-beaten and guilt-tripped into following Jesus. They must be invited and they must, on their own accord, accept the invitation when offered. The abundant and fulfilling nature of God's kingdom is only abundant and fulfilling to those who welcome

its presence and rejoice at its arrival. For those people who would toss the kingdom unceremoniously to the curb, the kingdom is an imposition, an irritant, a suffocating monstrosity which demands more than they are willing to give. Those who oppose the kingdom do not see abundant life within her walls, only death without the possibility of resurrection.

While the laborers are few (and if denominational attendance figures are any indicator, getting fewer), the harvest, Christ reminds us, is indeed plentiful. The nature of this harvest is evident through the ministry undertaken by the seventy-two whom Jesus sends forth in today's reading and should be evident through our own ministries. The harvest is not merely about numbers, about souls saved and peoples affected. The harvest is rooted in our sincere efforts to cultivate the kingdom in our midst, to foster its presence not only in our faith communities but in the larger world as a whole. The harvest is found in those places where our words and actions ripen into such fruits as peace, stability, nourishment, healing and rejoicing. In those places where evil and inhumanity are being overcome, where God's people are intentionally living into their baptisms as God's people, the kingdom is present and where the kingdom is present God is present. Rather than being measured by spacious skies and amber waves of grain, by majestic mountains and sobering deserts, by rivers and lakes replete with commerce, God's kingdom is measured by the abundance of grace, goodness and self-sacrificing love which flows, as a stream of living water, from the cross. God's kingdom is measured in the ways that you and I die to ourselves for the sake of others, in the ways that we perish into Jesus so as to grow in our discipleship. Only in this way will we and all the world become a harvest fit to be gathered by the Lord of heaven.