

"Christians Commissioned"

Based on Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Jesus calls 70 to do his work in the world in today's Gospel. Earlier, he called just 12 (Lk 9:1-6); now he sends out a crowd. Immediately we sense a difference between the way we preachers often present Jesus and the way Jesus functions here. We often speak of all the gifts that Christ gives. Here, Jesus gives tasks to be done. The tasks are dangerous, difficult, and demanding, judging from the instructions that Jesus gives the 70 (10:3). Furthermore, Jesus asks these followers to pray (10:2) that even more laborers will be enlisted for this tough task.

The commissioning of the 70 is to be a sign to the world that "the Kingdom of God has come near to you" (10:9, 11). These followers of Jesus and the work that they do are signs to the world of what God is up to in the world. In fact, Jesus goes so far as to say that whoever rejects one of these commissioned workers rejects him. Huge faith has been put in the 70 by the "Lord of the harvest." Furthermore, the 70 return "with joy," joyfully surprised that even the demons obey their command. God not only commissions these 70 workers but also empowers them to do the work that they are commissioned to do.

The church, the body of Christ in the world, is in the business of commissioning. We call people in so that we might send them out in Christ's name. One of the great responsibilities of the church is to, in Paul's words, "equip the saints." We are to give people the insights, skills, and faith they need to be engaged in ministry with Jesus.

So today's Gospel is a snapshot of a pageant that continues in this congregation and others. In preaching I engage in a major means of equipping the saints for the work of ministry. Here is a positive, yet also demanding word for us contemporary followers of Jesus. Jesus calls and commissions us to do his work.

Jesus calls a group of people to him. We are all here this morning because we feel that Christ has called us to himself. Christ has done things for us we could not do for ourselves, namely he has saved us and made us part of his reign. When one is in Christ, then one often receives gifts from Christ – peace, joy, purpose, and other gifts.

And yet this morning's Gospel reminds us that those who are called to Christ are commissioned by Christ. He sends out 70 (a much larger number of people than the original 12 disciples) and he commissions this crowd to do the same things that he does in the world. Jesus heals and teaches, preaches and saves, but he never does this by himself. Right from the first he commissions people to do the very same work that he does in the world. Jesus "co-missions." He doesn't work alone. His mission is a cooperative mission.

I wonder if most of us, when we think of Christ, think of all the good things he gives us when, according to today's Gospel, we ought also to be thinking of all the good things he gives us to give to the world.

Let me ask you: What gift has Christ given you, not just to enrich your life, but so that you might bless the lives of others? Where do you think Christ has commissioned and sent you to work in his name?

Jesus gives the 70 difficult work to do in the world. They are not to burden themselves with a lot of baggage. They are to expect rejection and resistance. It won't be easy. In other words, they can expect to receive some of the same rejection to their service of Jesus that Jesus himself receives.

Tough warnings. And yet, Jesus says that in them God's reign is coming near. We pray on Sundays, "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In these ordinary people, called to do extraordinary work, the reign of God is coming near to the world. The petition of the Lord's prayer is being fulfilled, though them!

The 70 return with joy – joyful that they have actually witnessed the reign of Jesus taking visible form through them.

Do you believe this morning's Gospel? I do. You have taught me the truth of Jesus' promise. I've seen this scripture for myself. I have seen you encountering great difficulty in your daily discipleship. I have seen you evoke the world's resistance. I've seen you have to admit failure and have to move on to other tasks.

And yet, I've also seen you be visible evidence of Jesus' resurrection and Jesus' commissioning of ordinary folk to do some extraordinary work. If we had time this Fourth of July Sunday, I could list specific examples of the way God still sends out workers for God. I could name names of those who today are numbered among the 70, the 10,000,070, the 70,000,000 that Jesus has commissioned. This is the way this God gets done what this God wants done.

For us Americans, today is our day of celebration of national independence. Freedom and independence are noble virtues. Yet today's Gospel moves us to celebrate another set of virtues: dependence (on Christ), obedience (to Christ), and yoked service (to Christ) are even greater virtues.

There are Sundays when we gather and read some strange passage of scripture that is difficult to understand, maybe even difficult to believe. This Sunday is different. This Sunday I've got undeniable, living proof of the truth of this scripture – you!

Let's pray....

We stand amazed, Lord Jesus, that you have called people like us to do work like yours. We know our limits! We know the cosmic scope of your work! And yet, if your work is to be done in this world, it's up to us to step up to your call, to confirm your confidence in us, and to serve you as best we can. Sometimes we question your judgment in entrusting so great a work to people like us. But who are we to quibble with the vocation you have given us? So one thing we pray: give us what we need to do the work that you call us to do. Amen.