

Lambs Among Wolves

The lectionary passages this morning all have to do with the triumph of the seemingly weak over the seemingly strong, the blessing of God that turns mourning into dancing. The youth and 'tweens looked with me this morning at the story of the great Syrian general, Naaman, who receives healing from a dread disease thanks to two servants, one a little girl, and an unprepossessing trickle of water. In the Epistle, Paul writes to the Galatians about the importance of bearing each other's burdens. But what really caught my attention and stirred my imagination this week was Jesus' metaphor of his disciples as lambs among wolves.

To begin with, I am struck by the all-inclusiveness of the call of Jesus in this story. Jesus, you will remember, is on his way through Samaria, traveling from Galilee towards Jerusalem. An incident in chapter 9, prior to the passage I read last week, tells us that he was not universally accepted. But enough people continued to follow him that he had to warn off the faint-hearted or partially committed. He made it clear to them that following him was going to require effort, willingness to sacrifice, complete focus. In many ways, today's passage echoes those themes. You'd think that all but his most devoted friends would be backing away in a hurry. Yet we read that Jesus was still able to send out seventy disciples in pairs to be his advance teams into towns he intended to visit. The number seventy is significant. It is a number that signifies completeness or wholeness in Biblical literature, a multiple of the days in the week. It is connected with the number of nations said to have descended from Noah after the flood – the whole of humanity, in other words. In this context, it would seem to imply that Jesus sent out all of his followers, and a nice healthy group they were, too.

I think it is a good reminder to us that the mission given by Jesus to these seventy is the mission that continues to be the charge of all those who would follow Jesus. That mission is to go and spread the Good News. Listen again to Jesus' instructions: "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' Cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" We are called to go and spread peace, to address the fears and anxieties of those whom God sends in our way. This is one of the ways, I think, in which we are to be as lambs among wolves. A lamb is not going to cause much anxiety to a pack of wolves. Indeed, they will be glad to see her – she's not a threat to them but a source of food. Just as the prey animal feeds the predator, so we are called to offer our spiritual meat, sharing the peace and strength that our relationship with God brings us, to feed the spiritual hunger of those who do not yet have that peace. We are to minister to the physical and spiritual needs of those we find on our travels through the world and to remind them that the love of God, which is greater than any earthly power, is offered to them freely. It is near to them – all they need do is accept it.

This self-sacrificial imagery shouldn't seem strange to us. The One we are called to emulate, Jesus, is known to us as the Lamb of God who offered himself for the world. Jesus himself told us, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." We do not know as we go out into the world what we will be called on to do or give for our brothers and sisters but we are called to make all of ourselves available. We do this because Jesus did it. We do this because we believe that it was in this way that Jesus fulfilled his mission to completely reveal the self-giving character of the Creator to humankind. The great story of the salvation of the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt tells us that a lamb was slain to provide the mark of safety for every family. The great story of the salvation of all peoples from bondage to brokenness and sin tells us that Jesus became that Paschal lamb for all of us. Now we are called

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to be lambs among the wolves, to be ready to give up anything and everything to let the world know that the love of God and the peace of Christ are available to them for merely the asking.

As I've said before, I don't have a lot of personal experience with real lambs but I suspect I can draw some solid inferences about what it means to be a lamb from my experience with other young animals. We've got a pair of kittens at our house right now, as you've no doubt heard. Their needs are very simple: food and water (and a place to eliminate the resulting waste), a safe place to sleep, companionship. Part of what it means to be one of Jesus' lambs among the wolves is to remember just how simple our needs are and to trust in God for providing them. Jesus addresses one of those needs in his assignment. He sends the disciples out in pairs. Some commentators feel that this has to do with the Jewish law that any news must be witnessed by two men to be considered true. In sending his disciples out in pairs, Jesus ensures that their message of God's peace and love will at least get the respect due to a confirmed fact. But I think the pairing of the disciples really has more to do with the companionship that all creatures need. We especially need the moral support of another lamb as we go out among the wolves. It is too easy otherwise to become distracted or demoralized, too easy to duck out of the difficult assignment to stand for God in an inimical society if we don't have someone on the spot who hold us accountable. It is not good for us to be alone, as God remarked upon seeing the lone Adam in the Garden. The Lone Ranger may be a popular part of the American mythos but there is no place for Lone Rangers in the kingdom of God.

Jesus also reminds his disciples that they (and we) can rely on God for the things we really need in life. "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house." In Jesus' time, wandering philosophers from the school of the Cynics were a common sight and well-known for their ubiquitous begging bags. Jesus does not want his disciples following this example. I wonder if there are things that we in the Church think are necessary to our way of doing things that the world sees in a negative light, just as Jesus' neighbors must have been suspicious of the Cynics with their begging bags? Neither does Jesus want the seventy to "host hop," looking for the home with the best food in each village. They are not to be motivated by their own desires for easy living but by the urgency of the mission to share God's love. It is a good reminder to us, embedded as we are in the world's most materialistic society. Nor should we fall into the trap of patronizing or despising the gifts of those to whom we are sent. As Emerson said, "Every man is my master in something." We are called to go out to share what we understand of God's amazing love and peace, but none of us can grasp the whole truth of God. As we share, we should also be willing to learn, for everyone we meet will have some piece of the truth to share back with us. We should eat what is set before us for it honors our hosts.

This does not mean we should embrace whole-heartedly everything that we hear in the world. We should understand that some of what those we meet tell us will run contrary to God's love and peace. In walking around our neighborhood in my campaigning, I've met a lot of lovely people, but I've also had an encounter with a sad older lady who was full of hatred and wanted me to listen as she excoriated those she held accountable for the evil in the world. When it was clear that she had no intention of hearing a word of peace, I politely let her know I could not agree with her, wished her God's blessing and departed. I think in doing so, I followed the part

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of one of Jesus' lambs confronted with a wolf. I like how The Message translates this part of Jesus' instructions: "'When you enter a town and are not received, go out in the street and say, 'The only thing we got from you is the dirt on our feet, and we're giving it back. Did you have any idea that God's kingdom was right on your doorstep?'" My friend Carol Lavelle has reminded me on occasion of the gentle disposition of sheep. Part of being the gentle lamb among the wolves is to follow the admonition of Proverbs 15:1: "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."

It may be difficult for us, as we seek to understand how to be Jesus' lambs among wolves, to grasp the meaning of verses 12-15 in Luke 10. Indeed, some versions of the lectionary call for those verses to be omitted from the reading this morning. I think you all know me well enough by now to know that's a great way to get me to focus in on those particular verses. What's the problem here? What could Jesus have meant? Following up on his instructions about wiping off the dust of the inhospitable home from our feet, he says: "I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But at the judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades." I'm inclined to agree with the Lutheran pastor Paul Nuechterlein who has written on this passage. He points out that Jesus proclaims these woes against the Jewish towns just after he has rejected the desire of James and John to call down heavenly fire on a Samaritan village that did not receive them. Nuechterlein points out that Jesus is upsetting the established order of insider and outsider. As outsiders, the Samaritans were despised by all "right thinking" Jews, but Jesus deals with them in mercy. The outcasts of society are bound to be angry, suspicious. They will need more time to hear and accept the word of peace and love. But the villages of Galilee had plenty of experience of Jesus' preaching and of his miraculous acts. For them to rest on their "insider" status and yawn in disinterest at Jesus is bringing judgment upon themselves. Rather than hear the word of peace and love as they should be able to, they go on in their brokenness, without even understanding that they have need of God's love and forgiveness. They condemn themselves to lives without peace. So it is for all who are smug and self-satisfied. All of humankind need the power of God's love to live the abundant life. But there are plenty who rest on the power of their minds or their bodies or their pocketbooks or their nation. None of those things has the power to bring true peace in our lives.

It is because of the prevalence of those attitudes, the hubristic notion that humankind can rely on its own strength without God to solve anything, that I think this call of Jesus for his disciples to go and witness to peace and love is just as critical now as it was when story was recorded; perhaps even more so. As long as human beings think we can find the answers of life in military might or the accumulation of worldly wealth or our own intelligence and theories without any recourse to the love of God and the peace of Christ, we are doomed to fail. Unless we learn to love God and God's creation, we will continue to hold our neighbors and our world at too low a value. We will continue to fight over resources, to kill in order to take what we want, to take more than our share while others are hungry or thirsty or naked or homeless. For every one of us here this morning, or in churches all over the world, who are committed to living our lives according to the teachings of Jesus and the wisdom accumulated in the scriptures, there are more, far more, for whom the way of Jesus is not a lifestyle but simply another set of unenforceable

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rules to be skirted as they pursue what is right in their own eyes. The fields are indeed white unto harvest and God's workers, the lambs of Christ, are few. It is a daunting calling to be lambs among wolves but it is necessary, desperately necessary, for each of us to pick up our cross and follow.

It is a daunting calling but one with surprising benefits. Luke records what happened when the seventy returned from their tour of the Judean villages they visited in advance of their Master. "The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!"¹⁸ He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'" Being a lamb among wolves may sound scary, but it really shouldn't. We're not going it alone – we have partners in this venture to support us and pray for us and be with us in fellowship. As I mentioned, seventy is a number of completion – there are always just enough of us when we need each other. And as we venture out with the Good News, we will find that the things that frighten us, the demons of modern life, are subject to us through the power of Christ Jesus. What is it that frightens us today, that keeps us from going out to spread the Good News among our friends and co-workers and neighbors and fellow students? Ridicule, perhaps? Social ostracism? Being accused of bad manners? I am convinced that if we take a message of peace and love with an attitude of peace and love that people will hear us. In fact, I am convinced that they will want to hear us. We cannot, as Jesus' disciples did, simply wander up to a stranger's house and ring the bell and expect to be invited in. In first Century Palestine, hospitality to strangers was an important part of the cultural expectation. In twenty-first Century Seattle, the social norms are quite different. But if we follow the Celtic Way of Evangelism, to which I've referred before, if we live next to people and show them friendship, invite them to become a part of our lives and wait for an invitation to become part of theirs, then we will have the forum we need to invite them to share what is most meaningful and most precious to us – the love of God. It is how we are to be lambs in today's often wolfish culture. When we are gentle and giving, we attract positive feelings about our lifestyle, our lifestyle based on Jesus who came into the world not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved.

My friends, we are the lambs of the Good Shepherd. We proclaim it in the name we give ourselves, in the love we extend to the community. Let us not forget that we are called to go out from this place as lambs, to greet our neighbors with peace and to remind them that the power of God, which is love, is offered to them freely. May God grant us the gentleness and courage of our loving Lord, Christ Jesus, the Lamb of God. Amen.