

Message for June 26, 2022

Luke 10:1-12

In one of his sermons, the American preacher William Willimon relates an episode from his younger days when he was in Scouts. Every summer they would go to a camp and one of the activities was swimming in the lake. When the boys were in the water they had to follow the 'buddy system'; in the interest of safety they had to have their assigned partner near them all the time. Then, every once in a while, a whistle was blown and when it was the boys had to stop what they were doing, join hands, and hold them up in the air. And if they were not close enough to immediately join hands then the two boys were ordered out of the water and not allowed to go back in for the rest of the day. Now we may not realize it but in a sense that is what Jesus did in today's scripture passage; he instituted a buddy system for the safety and well-being of his followers.

In today's scripture passage Jesus sent 72 of his followers to the towns and villages that he planned to visit in the near future. These people were to prepare the way for him by giving, as if it were, an advance taste of what he would be saying and doing; in a sense they were like modern day campaign workers going to a town before the leader shows up for the big rally. Jesus however knew that they would not always be welcomed and that what the 72 would be doing might even be dangerous; as he said, "I am sending you out like lambs among wolves". That is why for their own support and protection he sent them out in pairs. Indeed Jesus knew full well that both they and their message would sometimes be harshly rejected. As it was then so it still is today.

Last week we celebrated Boston's 200th anniversary and the sermon was preached by the Rev. Dr. Mark Lewis. I found it to be a very thought-provoking sermon and, in the interest of transparency, much though not all of what follows is inspired by it. For those of you who were not able to be present at the service, the sermon was entitled "I Don't Feel Connected to God Anymore" and it began with the state of the church in Canadian society today. The statistics are certainly disheartening. Back in the 1940's over 70% of Canadians regularly attended worship on a Sunday morning but since then that number has steadily shrunk until we've got to where we are today. Just prior to the pandemic about 10% of us regularly attended Sunday services but now it is estimated that only about 7% of us do. To put it another way, and while it is too early to be sure, the

early indicators are that only seven of every ten people who attended church on a regular basis two years ago still are. But why is this happening?

There is no shortage of answers and ideas. One is that many of those who no longer come have found other things to do on a Sunday morning. Others simply prefer to read the sermon or watch a service online. Another explanation for those who have turned their back on the church is that they never got past the 'Sunday School stage'. This is to say, they learned the stories of the Bible as a child but never got any further. To these people many of the stories in the Bible are just that, mere stories that they find rather unbelievable in our modern scientific age. To use two examples, we can think of the Creation story where it is said that God created the world in seven days, and the Temptation Story where there is a talking snake in the Garden of Eden.

In light of modern scientific knowledge, many people today find stories such as these unbelievable and so they reject the church altogether. This however is unfortunate because it fails to do the Bible justice. Yes, the Bible most certainly does contain facts and history but back when the Bible was written, most people conveyed the truth by telling stories. To put it another way, the factual truthfulness of the story didn't really matter. What really mattered was what the story was telling us. Indeed I suspect that many people of the ancient world would be bewildered by the rejection of the Bible by many people today simply because they don't think that it is factually true. The people of the ancient world would say that we have missed the point altogether. Yet while some people reject the church because of their understanding of the Bible, other's reject it because of their understanding of God.

I remember one of my colleagues talking about a young man who had recently joined his congregation. The young man was married and had his own business. At first he was full of enthusiasm and was in church virtually every Sunday. As time passed however his enthusiasm dwindled and his church attendance became increasingly sporadic. My colleague asked him why and in reply the young man said that he thought that he had made a pact with God when he became a Christian and joined the church; that God would look after him and that his life would be smooth. Well, there were still disagreements at home and hassles with customers at work. The man reasoned then that since God hadn't kept his side of the bargain, why should he keep his? But while

some people may reject the church because of their understanding of God, yet others reject it because of their understanding of the very church itself.

When we look back at the history of the church there is a lot to be proud of and yet, there are many times when it has not lived up to the teaching of Jesus. In the past for example, there were episodes such as the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition. More recently we can think of various sex abuse scandals, the residential school system and the abuse that happened in some of those schools. Moving on to the present day, we can think of the issue that is consuming the church today, including our own denomination, and that is gay marriage. On the one side are those who, based on their understanding of scripture, believe that gay marriage is wrong. On the other side are those who, based on their understanding of scripture, say that since God is love and that God created gay people the way they are, such marriages should be permitted. And so the debate rages, but what do many people on the outside of the church looking in think?

In the eyes of many and probably most people in our society today, the church is simply discriminating and hypocritical. The church says that it loves and welcomes everyone, but it doesn't really. In fact many say that a church's refusal to marry gays is like a church refusing to marry someone because of their ethnicity, age or some other characteristic that they have no control over. Indeed whether it be in the movies or in TV shows, what is the popular stereotype of a Christian today? A person who is kind and caring, or a person who is harsh, judgemental, self-righteous, and rather dislikeable? While it was written many years ago, the poet Shelley captured the feelings of many people today when he said, "I could believe in Christ if he did not drag along with him that leprous bride of his – the church".

Sadly, whether it be because of their perception of the Bible, God, or even the church itself, many people look at the church today and say, "thanks but no thanks". This however leaves us with a paradox; even as people are turning their backs on organized religion, many are not giving up on religion altogether. In fact in poll after poll most people say that while they are not 'religious', they are 'spiritual'. What they mean by this is that while they do not attend church services or participate in the life of a congregation, they still believe in God, pray, and have 'spiritual' thoughts and feelings. In short, they are off on their own doing their own thing.

A poem written by Emily Dickinson back in the 1800's anticipates and captures the attitude of many people today.

Some keep Sabbath by going to church,
I keep it staying at home.
With a boblink for a chorister,
And an orchard for a dome.

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice,
I just wear my wings,
And instead of tolling the bell for church,
Our little sexton sings.

God preaches – a noted clergyman,
And the sermon is never long.
So instead of getting to heaven at last,
I'm going all along!

The sentiments of this poem sound so appealing and reasonable to so many people today; who needs the church? The problem though is that if everyone is off in their own corner doing and believing their own thing, who is to say what is right, just, or true? In effect we are indulging in a religion and even in a God of our own imagination. The reality is that both we and the world need the church. We do so because despite its many very real failures and shortcomings, the church is still the one institution in the world that is committed to following Christ and doing his will. The church is the one institution in the world that is dedicated to proclaiming and living the good news of the gospel. We cannot, should not, and even must not be off on our own doing our own thing. Jesus knew this, and that is why he sent the 72 out in pairs. He knew that he was sending them out like lambs amongst wolves. He knew that they, and we, need one another for comfort, instruction, support, and protection. He knew that they, and we, need a buddy system.

Pastoral Prayer

Hear us we pray as we come to you in prayer on this, the very first Sunday of summer. We thank you for this season of warmth that is now upon us, even as we remember and pray for all for whom the heat and humidity of the past week was a hardship to bear. We thank you for what this season means for so many people; holidays, and a break from the routine. We pray for the safety and well-being of all throughout the summer as we even now look forward to next week's holiday weekend.

We give you thanks for what it is that we will be celebrating next weekend, the birth of our nation. We thank you for all in our nation that is good, even as we regret the failures and shortcomings of the past. Help us to learn from the past, so that we might truly do better and be a better nation and society in the future.

We pray this day for the many places and nations that are not as blessed as we are. We pray for the people of Ukraine as the war continues. We pray too for the people of Afghanistan after this past week's devastating earthquake, one more tribulation on top of all the others: the drought, and the collapse of their society and economy after the takeover by the Taliban.

We thank you that in a world where so many go without, we are blessed with an abundance to eat, as well as peace and security. We pray this day for all those who are struggling to get by even as prices continue to rise, and those who are forced to resort to charity in order to feed themselves and their families.

We thank you for the health and the abilities that we have, praying for those who are ill or coping with the challenges of their infirmities and growing older.

We thank you for this church to which we belong, and the larger church of which we are a part. We pray for the ministry and well-being of your Son's body here on earth as she continues to minister in these difficult and challenging times. Grant that she, and we, may do our best to carry out her ministry here on earth until the day comes when your will truly is done here on earth as it is in heaven.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen

