



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Two by Two

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 3, 2016

The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost—Based on Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

It's a dim part of our common memory, I think, this aspect of Jesus' ministry: the period when he sent out forerunners ahead of him, two by two, into the surrounding villages. In other communities, this part of the Jesus movement is a keystone. It's because of this passage that you see clean-cut pairs of young Mormons walking side by side in every city of the world. Or why you see two Jehovah's Witnesses beaming on either side of their glossy tract rack. It makes sense. It's an efficient way both to get the message out and have companionship and support in a setting that might find you strange.

Episcopalians don't really do this. I've thought about why that is. And I think you have to look at our history. Our strain of Christians hasn't had to reach out much, because we were so good at not working the streets, but working the halls of power. Our line of Christians converted at least two Empires, the Roman and then the British. And we had a fair hold on the American one, for a time. The National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. is an artifact of that time in our nation's history. But I have to tell you that it is not the full story. Reaching out like this has been a part of our history, just not on as grand a scale as other denominations.

I tried it once. My first year out of seminary, I got a call to serve in Yonkers at a parish that had faded to a whisper. I and another priest, and even some members of St. Bart's, incidentally, were tasked with having a go at bringing the parish back from the brink. We did a lot to build up the place, tried all kinds of things. One of them was going door to door. A priest and a seminarian, a pair of Jesus' friends, knocking on doors, telling people about St. Paul's parish and what we were doing. It was at once mortifying and illuminating. Mortifying because the looks we got and the reactions we received sometimes made us want to crawl under a rock and never leave! Illuminating because there were diamonds in the rough, striking encounters where a real connection was made, bursts of joy and delight. I'll never forget walking down the street to the next house and running into a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses going for the same house! Let's just say it was awkward.

But we were trying to tell people about the life of an Episcopal parish, trying to get them to come to church, frankly. This was rather different from what Jesus was telling his two-by-two followers to proclaim. He told them to go to new villages, don't take much, don't dilly-dally on the way there, and live in the homes that would take them. They would be good guests, eating everything that was on their plate. If they were accepted in a village, they would tell everyone they met that "The Kingdom of God is near to you." This is a bit confusing, I think, to us now. Because this line that Jesus directs with, this wasn't the only thing they were meant to say. That would be completely off-putting. Instead of a line to be parroted, this was meant to be the upshot of everything they would do in that village. They were meant to show forth that God's purposes were so very close to being fulfilled. They would act and live as a living sign that God's presence was so very close.

What exactly did this look like? Well, we can speculate in some helpful ways. It involved declaring "peace" wherever they went. Not words of judgment. Not John the Baptist's cry of "Repent, you brood of vipers." They had words of peace on their lips. They had no interest in other people's stuff, or their station in life, what did they have to fight about? They were people of peace who proclaimed peace in a world of war and occupation. How refreshing it must have been. Like when the Dalai Lama or the Pope comes to the city, the whole place takes on a new atmosphere by the presence of a holy and peaceful person declaring words of peace. These friends of Jesus were doing a similar thing and making waves, because they lived it in their lives, and they firmly declared their hope for it for every house that they entered.

And it involved curing the sick wherever they went, or, at least, maintaining a steadfast interest in the sick's welfare, blessing them, praying with them, treating them like a human in a village that probably treated them like dirt, or, even worse, like radioactive dirt. Yes, Jesus' friends went not to the high places, but the low places, and declared God's blessing and peace in places that people thought God had abandoned. Their orientation toward the diseased and outcast of the societies they visited often transformed the dynamic of that society, like a good contagion, or like the lifting of a curse, or like the exorcism of a demon. Whatever they did in proclaiming peace and the closeness of God's fullness, it turned lives and whole communities around for the better. What once was in turmoil was now at peace. What once was cursed was now blessed. What once were the homes of demons were now children of the Most High God.

But, as in our time, there would have been a significant contingent of people for whom the seventy's message and presence would have disturbed, disturbed by their proclamation of peace. So many are interested in war and conflict: some make a great deal of money off of the anxiety and fear that come with war; peace could cause a recession of that profiting economy. Or, perhaps more common, so many are interested in war because it gives them an enemy, and that black and white understanding of the world gives their lives meaning and purpose. If Jesus' friend's peace is true, then their life and a whole spiritual identity economy are built on a lie, and who wants to face that?

This same dynamic of resistance would have pertained to the seventy's ministrations to the sick. Their blessings and their declaration of God's healing would have meant that the lepers and the possessed and all other kinds of outcasts and, I bet, exploited people would have to be dealt with as human beings, and not as monsters. As you might imagine, some would not be interested in the seventy healing people who people felt truly deserved their suffering. Who were they to suggest that the world worked differently?

They did declare that the world worked differently! "The Kingdom of God, a new Way, a new World, is near, is *this* close!" The sick are blessed. The curses are lifted. And peace be among you as it is in heaven itself. Ooh some people hated this. And couldn't see past their fear and righteous hate. And so some of the more entrenched villages cast the pairs of Jesus' friends out! This was no surprise to Jesus—his own hometown cast him out upon hearing his first sermon, which dared to suggest that the fulfillment of God's work was near. They tried to throw him off a cliff, a Nazareth-style lynching. So Jesus wasn't surprised. What he had to impress upon them, though, was that their being cast out was NOT an occasion for more conflict and war. Although some of the most famous people in the Hebrew Scriptures took it this way, so you could understand why the disciples asked once if they could rain down fire on a village that rejected them. Even though it seemed they had red-handed proof that this village was an enemy, Jesus rebuked this impulse to fight one's spiritual resistors. He instead entrenched them in the cause of peace, away from the path of grudges and divine retribution. He asked that they do nothing more than wipe the dust off their feet, or as Taylor Swift would say, that they "shake it off."

So that's what they did. They served in the places they were welcomed, and didn't in the places they weren't. We read these seventy, all of them it seems, returned with joy, reporting back to Jesus that "Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us!" They found that, in the places that were receptive of course, they had an experience of evil and curses being lifted from downtrodden homes and villages. What a power to wield!

Their power can be our power, too, you know? This is why I go on and on about this. Do we dare to wield that power given to us by God? Do we dare to declare "peace" to houses in our life, even warring ones, whether they are warring nations, political parties, or cultures? Do we dare to declare hope and healing and God's presence among those that our society deems broken, a loser, perverted, shameful, or traitorous? Are we willing to proclaim, if quietly, that not only are we aiming to be a blessing in this world and to the world, but that we come in the name of Jesus, or St. Bart's, or God, and somehow lift the curse that has been cast on Jesus' name by those who insist on hating, judging, scorning while invoking their true Christianity? Are we willing to dig in to loving the world as Christ loves, daring to stumble upon the boundaries that are out there, the boundaries, both visible and invisible that declare who is worth love and who is not. Are we willing to open our hearts and our lips, using the words our Savior taught us, ready to watch Satan himself fall like lightning, with the tried and true words of the seventy: "Peace be upon this house! The Kingdom of God is near!"