

Motivation

Luke 10 (various)

July 26, 2009

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.

Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. 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. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there; and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’

But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’”

The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” He said to them, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

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The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

There are nineteen people who are now experts on this passage of scripture. This is the passage we studied in preparation for our trip to Malawi, Africa. It is also the passage from which I preached last Sunday in a tiny church in a tiny village called Dzuwa where we spent most of a week building relationships and partnering in mission.

Jesus is giving instructions on what it means to be sent.

That is what it means to be a disciple – to be sent.

It is also what it means to be the church – to be sent.

It doesn't matter where: sometimes we are sent across the street; sometimes it is across the ocean. Sometimes we are sent to love our enemies; sometimes to forgive our friends. What is clear is that Jesus doesn't ask his followers to sit and wait for the kingdom of God to come – he send us out to work for that kingdom. To prepare. To spread the good news.

Two weeks ago, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, you sent us to Africa. We thought we knew what were being sent to do – but God had different ideas.

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It was one week ago last Thursday that I discovered something new that God was doing through our trip. We arrived in Malawi with a plan; with a schedule. There were projects we came to do; things we wanted to achieve. Some of that happened: our group led a program for microfinance and business practices for the women of the village, we hosted a medical clinic, some of us taught art at a local school.

Some of our plans did not happen. And then there were additions that we did not plan.

One week ago Thursday, two of our hosts – Ron and Elliot – informed Sarah and me that our group would be doing door to door evangelism.

That is what they said: door to door evangelism.

I looked at Elliot for a minute to see if I heard him right, and when I was convinced that he was serious I asked him what he meant by “evangelism.”

“You know,” he said, “sharing the gospel with people. You can do that, right?”

“Sure!” I heard myself say.

There were a lot of things going on in my head at that moment. In talking to Sarah, I discovered that we were on the same page.

First off, when I hear door to door evangelism I think of Mormons. Most Mormon missionaries I have met are nice young men – but their approach leaves something to be desired. Door to door anything is a bad idea in my opinion. If you are not invited, you are suspicious. I didn’t see how the gospel would be served by just showing up to share it; especially if that person showing up was me.

Secondly, I believe that sharing the gospel and the faith is best done in relationship. Now in case you didn’t know – our group stuck out just a little bit. When our bus rumbled down the dusty road into the village the children ran across the fields pointing at us and yelling, “Azungas! Azungas!” “White people! White people!” We were white; we were tall; we spoke English; we wore funny clothes. Not the makings of an easy conversation, if you asked me.

Aside from these initial objections, and with a week’s worth of reflection, I think the other thing that was going on in my head was why we would be doing evangelism at all. We were there to work. In my mind, that equaled evangelism. Didn’t these people know that we spent thousands of dollars and traveled halfway across the globe to sleep on a concrete floor and eat rice for a week – not because we wanted a vacation – but because we were living out our faith?

I couldn’t articulate it then, but this was the real reason for my hesitation when Elliot asked us to be door-to-door evangelists. In the end, of course, we did what we were asked. Twenty of us went out – in teams of four, each group with a translator, to the various villages to spread the good news.

Do you know that we were welcomed? At every stop – when we showed up to share the good news, the man or woman of the house would get out a straw mat and motion for us to sit.

I was in a group with Emily and Ruth Booker and Lauren Rogers. They were fabulous. The ease with which they shared themselves and their faith was astounding. When we gathered back together at lunch, we heard from the other groups that their experience was just as terrific as ours. The villagers they met with welcomed them, engaged them, and ended up asked good questions about faith. One was particularly memorable: “Why aren’t prayers always answered as soon as we would like?”

The body of Christ came alive that morning. Our connection through the faith that we shared was apparent.

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In the passage we read from Luke’s gospel Jesus gathers seventy people and he sends them out. When the Bible mentions a number, it is a good idea to pay attention. One chapter earlier in Luke, Jesus sends his 12 disciples. Here, Jesus sends out the seventy.

At the time Luke’s gospel was shared, the world consisted of seventy known nations. Luke’s point is that Jesus sends out everybody – the known world – all who are, and all who will be, disciples of Jesus.

Notice what he sends them out to do: eat what is set before you, cure the sick, and announce the kingdom of God. He might also have said: meet people where they are, and do the work of social outreach (or justice) and the work of sharing the good news (or evangelism).

In the United States, we live in a culture where – many times – churches align themselves to one of those two ways: justice or evangelism.

There are churches who pride themselves on advocacy for the poor, and giving money away to social agencies, and embracing diversity – who can’t say one word about why they do all of those things. They can’t talk about Jesus.

There are other churches that talk about Jesus so much that they forget they are supposed to follow. Many times, these churches obsess about living a holy life – in terms of personal morality – while there is not one word about the poor, or about the topic that Jesus

spent the majority of his time talking about in the scriptures: the use (and misuse) of money.

Jesus sends out the seventy – all those who would be his disciples – to do both: the work of justice and the work of evangelism. It isn't enough to care about one without regard to the other.

Justice without Jesus is a well meaning social organization.
Jesus without justice is an impostor.

Neither is a reflection of the true Church.

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We went to Malawi to help; to make a difference – and to build relationships. Thanks be to God, all of that happened.

The group we partnered with, Joy to the World Ministries, has committed themselves to locating the base of their operations in a tiny village, in a tiny country, on a troubled continent. They are also committed, in their own words, to sharing the “whole gospel” with the world.

In three years – since Joy to the World arrived in Dzuwa village – a maize mill is operational (where people grind their corn to make the staple meal of Malawi), a medical clinic is almost open, there are seven deep water wells to provide clean drinking water, the schools are beginning to turn around, women are being trained to be entrepreneurs, crops are being irrigated – and all of that is taking place within the framework of responding to God's love in Jesus Christ.

The people of Joy to the World ministries have heeded Jesus' instruction: they are sharing the “whole gospel” with Dzuwa by doing the work of social transformation (or justice) and the work of evangelism. Almost literally in every breath – they are clear about their motivation for the good work they are doing: it is by the power of God, to honor God.

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I am here – back home, with you my congregation, renewed and refreshed. And I am here convicted by an experience of the Holy Spirit that I had in Malawi.

I believe that we all need to be clear about our motivation.

That is not to say that we do not have clear motivations. I think we do. I think that all of our work in outreach and benevolent giving and seeing our staff and our building as outreach is rooted in the faith.

But the time is coming – and, indeed, it is already here – when we cannot assume that anyone understands why we behave the way we do.

We need to give voice to our reasons for reaching out. We need to shed our fear of seeming too religious. We need to uncover and rediscover the ground of our being: that we have been redeemed by Jesus the Christ – not to the satisfaction of ourselves, but for the salvation of the world.

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Pray with me: Good and gracious God – you are our source, our life, our purpose. Help us to serve you – and, indeed, the world – by the words that we say and the actions that we take. That we might be participants in your coming kingdom. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.