

Send and Receive

In the name of him through whom our names are written in heaven, dear friends in Christ: “The harvest is plentiful; but the workers are few. Therefore earnestly pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest field”; so said our Lord Jesus looking out on the countryside all around him. In every direction he knew there were people who were living in bondage to sin and sadly dying in ignorance of the salvation he came to bring. It was a situation he found to be intolerable. And so, moved with compassion for these countless lost souls, he answered his own prayer by sending out 72 evangelists to prepare the inhabitants of the towns and villages of Galilee and beyond for his later arrival.

In so doing, he was foreshadowing the explosion of evangelistic work that would take place in the years after his death, resurrection, and ascension when the fullness of the Gospel would be understood and could be proclaimed by his disciples. This evangelistic work, this proclamation of the Good News of what Jesus has done to save all sinners, continues today through the life and ministry of the Church. And it’s clear as we look out at the world around us that there is still plenty to do: the harvest is indeed plentiful. Untold millions – billions even – continue to live in bondage to sin and are dying in ignorance of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore it’s right that we too earnestly pray to the Lord of the harvest that he would continue to send laborers into his harvest field. It’s right too that like Jesus we act: that we send pastors, evangelists, and missionaries to teach the Word of God at home and abroad, and that we support their ongoing work; that we encourage young people with the right qualifications to enter the preaching and teaching ministry; and that we ourselves take advantage of the opportunities we have to give the reason for the hope that lies within us to those who do not know Jesus and what he’s done. Christian love and compassion demands that we do what we can to get the Good News out there, and that we keep on earnestly praying to the Lord of the harvest that he would send laborers into his harvest field.

But today’s Gospel reminds us that spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not merely a question of sending people out to preach God’s Word. No, it’s a two way street. It’s not enough that the message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus be proclaimed; it must also be received. That is to say it’s not enough to have an evangelist proclaiming the Word. There also must be someone to hear it. For it to do any good, the message sent must also be the message received. And it happens that today’s Gospel lesson has a lot to say about the interaction of the evangelist or preacher and those who hear him.

First Jesus says to those he sends out to proclaim the drawing near of God’s kingdom, “I am sending you out as lambs among wolves.” That doesn’t sound very encouraging, does it? What chance do lambs have against a pack of ravenous wolves? But this describes the general situation: the world at large is the territory of Satan. People are in bondage to sin and unbelief, and therefore they will be hostile to the Lord and to the Christian Gospel. The general response of the world will be to reject Christ and those who proclaim him as Savior – sometimes to the point of using violence. Those who belong to Christ, however, are never to use violence themselves; no more than a lamb would attack a wolf. This is especially true of our efforts to share the Good News. Unlike Islam, which though it claims to be a religion of peace has no qualms about using force and threats of violence to make converts, Christianity relies on the power of God’s Word alone to turn hearts to the Lord. Those who proclaim Christ are never to use force, not even defensively when being attacked by the enemy. Instead they are to trust

their Good Shepherd who, if he leads them into the valley of death's shadow, will also protect them in time according to his own plans and assure their ultimate salvation in eternity.

Now, it must be acknowledged that in the history of the Church there have been those who didn't understand this. I'm thinking of things like the Spanish conquests of Mesoamerica and certain events that took place during the Crusades. Then it happened that some wrong-headed and overzealous believers tried to force others to convert to Christianity. But when such attempts have been made, those who did so were operating in opposition to Christian principles. They were being unfaithful to the Lord. And besides, it doesn't work. True conversion is always an act of God who works only through the Word – the power of the Gospel message itself. That's the sword of the Spirit: the only weapon we have in the war against Satan.

Jesus further instructs those he sends to proclaim his Word (if you'll allow me to use modern terms), "Don't take with you a wallet, a suitcase full of clothes, or an extra pair of shoes." The central idea here is that entering the evangelistic ministry of the Church is an act of faith. You have to believe that where God sends you he will also support you. My own experience at seminary and in the time since has certainly proved this. I know many other preachers and teachers who can attest to the same – how when they were down to their last dime facing a stack of bills to pay, suddenly, unexpectedly, from an unknown source, precisely the amount needed would appear. On the other end, on occasion I've run into people who said they wanted to serve in the preaching ministry but who said, "I can't afford to go to seminary." And that's right: if they sit down and do the math, they'll never be able to afford it. And if that's the attitude, they shouldn't go. I mean, if you don't trust the Lord to take care of you in worldly affairs, how are you going to preach to others about how they should trust Christ to take care of them in heavenly matters? Mind you, I'm not advocating blind financial irresponsibility. The Lord gave us brains. We should use them. But serving the Lord begins with trusting the Lord.

And now we come to how the message of the Gospel is received. It is above all a message of peace: how God has reconciled the world to himself through the death of his Son who paid the penalty of our sin and rose to show our innocence in the court of God's justice. In Christ – through faith in him – we have peace with God. This is the peace the preacher is to proclaim. And where it is received in faith, then the peace of God which passes all understanding abides with those who believe. They know and experience the joy of God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus. And there the preacher is to remain for as long as the Lord wants him to be there. And there too, it's incumbent upon those who are benefitting from his ministry that they support their preacher. Jesus says, "Eat and drink what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages." That is to say the way the Lord provides for those who work for him is through the gifts and offerings of the believers. There is the suggestion here also that the Lord's laborers are not to receive special treatment. They are to live and do their work among the people in their congregation as one of the people in the congregation, that is, according to the same standard of living. This is why Jesus tells them not to go from house to house, always being treated like a guest of honor – until the honor wears off and then you move to the next house. It's not to be that way. The minister is not doing the work of the Lord to become rich or receive honors; but neither is he to expect to be treated as a dog who survives on table scraps. Those whose work is the Gospel are to make their living from the Gospel – make their living from the grateful generosity of those among whom they do their work of preaching and teaching the Word.

But those who reject the message, who harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit who works through the Word, they remain outside the covenant of God's grace. The kingdom of God has come to them, and yet they prefer remain in the kingdom of Satan. And where this is

the prevailing attitude, the evangelist is to move on. No sense in pounding your head against a wall; but still the warning is to be given: "You are under God's judgment. This place stands condemned. We don't even want the dust of your doomed streets clinging to our feet. The kingdom of God has come near to you, and you would not enter it."

And here Jesus speaks some of the strongest words of condemnation that appear in the Scriptures. There is a correlation, he says, between the amount of revelation one is given and the severity of the judgment that will fall upon him if he rejects it. He singles out two Galilean villages, Chorazin and Bethsaida, where he himself spent a great deal of time teaching and performing healing miracles. Jesus says if the notoriously pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon had seen and heard what they did in his ministry, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes. Thus the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida are under greater condemnation because having the more thorough revelation, they still refused to repent and believe the Good News. But Jesus reserves his sharpest words for the city of Capernaum. That was Jesus' "home base" during his Galilean ministry. It's where he spent the majority of his time and where he did the most teaching. In that sense the city had been exalted up to heaven by the richness of the revelation of Christ it received; and thus also because of its rejection of Jesus after having had so great a revelation, for its inhabitants is reserved a spot in the deepest pits of hell.

With the gift of greater revelation of Jesus Christ and his saving Gospel comes greater responsibility for reception and for faith. This is important for us because now in our age the full Gospel has been revealed in the person and work of Jesus. Those who reject the Gospel message today are guilty of the greatest sin of all: the sin against the Holy Spirit – the Spirit who accompanies the Gospel message whenever it is proclaimed and who through it breathes life and faith into hearts dead in sin and unbelief. It takes a continuous, perverse, and willful act of the sinful mind to say no to God and the salvation he has prepared for all in Jesus Christ. Those who do so are without excuse.

But taking it a step further, if there is a Capernaum today, a place where Jesus and his Gospel are revealed better than anywhere else, in crystal clarity, without the confusion of aberrant teachings and accumulated traditions that tend to cloud the person and work of the Savior, then it is in our own Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Among us Jesus Christ and his saving work are revealed the most clearly and thoroughly. I say this not to boast or to gloat about being better than others; quite the contrary. I say it as a warning. It is by God's grace alone that we have preserved in our church's confessions the pure, complete, and unadulterated Gospel. The upshot is that we are like the man in the Parable of the Talents who received the most from his master to put to work for him. To whom much is given, much is required. Because we have received more of Christ's revelation, we ought to have the strongest and most complete faith in Christ. And not just faith; but faithfulness: living in the joy of the peace of God, letting the Spirit govern our thoughts and actions, and doing what we can to reach out to others to share with them the revelation we have received in such abundance.

Sadly, I fear that that's often not the case. Instead we tend to take for granted what we have received in our Lutheran heritage. I've found in my ministry that the most dedicated and faithful Lutherans are usually those who weren't raised as Lutherans. They come out of other branches of Christianity where they tend to muddy the distinction of Law and Gospel, making salvation depend on a combination of faith in Christ and what the believer must do. The result is they are always left in doubt about whether they are saved. It's a horrible way to live. When they come to see Christ and the Gospel as they're taught among us, that burden of doubt and despair is lifted. They experience at long last the peace of God their former faith promised but never delivered. And then they look around at us and wonder why we're not as filled with joy

and enthusiasm as they are. “You’re sitting on a great treasure”, they say, “Why aren’t you doing more to share it?”

Why indeed. Could it be that we’ve lost the joy of our salvation? Could it be that we’ve come to think that somehow we deserve the grace we have received? Could it be that we’re just spoiled with the richness of the revelation of Christ we’ve been given? I expect so; which means we need to repent. And we need to pray with David, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free spirit.” And we need to trust that the Lord who has given us so great a revelation of his Son will also, for his sake, answer our prayer for greater faith and faithfulness.

We’re told that the 72 evangelists returned to Jesus rejoicing about the things they were able to accomplish in his name. And they were indeed great things – defeating the powers of darkness. But Jesus redirects their focus: “Don’t get all excited about what you were able to do for the kingdom” he tells them, “Rejoice instead in what I have done for you. Rejoice that through faith in me your names are written in heaven.”

Dear friends, your names are written there too. Let that truth fill you with overwhelming joy. And the peace of God that passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!