

sermon-7/4/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
“Citizens of God’s Commonwealth”

Dual-focus Sundays present their own unique set of challenges. By dual-focus I am referring to the fact that this is the 4th of July where we celebrate this country’s founding and it is also a Sunday where we are given a scripture text to contemplate. This year the interplay between those two focuses is especially interesting.

In our Luke passage we read that Jesus sent out seventy of his followers to go, two by two, into the surrounding towns. They are to prepare the way for Jesus to follow them into those same places.

One commentator remarked that this group of disciples must have been quite a bunch. Jesus had a hard enough time finding twelve able followers to be in his original band of disciples. Those twelve were a ragamuffin group to be sure. These seventy were probably every bit as much an uneven group in terms of talents and ability.

Given all that, it does not take a great stretch for us to identify ourselves with those seventy. They are a cross section of humanity as is the modern-day Church. I think Luke intended for his church to see that as well. God, in Christ, is calling the Church in any age to be the advance guard, living in such a way people’s hearts are softened so they might be ready to receive Christ. To put it another way, how do our lives, the way we treat others, the values our actions express, how do those things prepare the ground for others to meet God?

Luke then has Jesus give the seventy some advice as to how they should go about preparing the way for him. He says they are to go in peace, like lambs among wolves. It is amazing he did not lose some of those seventy when he made that a requirement. Can you imagine how that would go down today, in a country where even reasonable gun control laws seem impossible to pass? In a culture obsessed with the right to protect one’s life at all costs, being a lamb among wolves is a tough sell.

Next Jesus says travel light. When he goes on to explain what he means by that, most of us would find it impossible to travel that light. Commentators say we should probably not take his words too literally. They are most likely an impossible ideal towards which we should strive.

Still the goal is clear. We are not to have too much baggage in this life if we are to be effective missionaries for Christ. Part of traveling light is to be satisfied with what we have. Jesus tells them to remain in the first house that invites them to stay. The issue here was some missionaries were switching houses if someone offered them a better deal. Jesus says quit looking for greener pastures. Be content with what you have been given.

Traveling light also extends to religious beliefs. He says eat what is put in front of you. Scholars tell us these missionaries were probably traveling in gentile territory. The food

presented to them was not going to be kosher. Jesus says eat it anyway. There are more important things than religious laws. Prioritize what is most important and don't get lost in rules and regulations that are not bad on the surface, but can get in the way of being gracious or humble. The Church needs to hear that message more than ever!

Finally, Jesus says they should remember who they are. When the seventy came back they were pumped. They were incredibly successful in their missionary work, even having control over evil spirits! Jesus says success is fine, but it pales in comparison to our identity as children of God. "Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

That last phrase is just another way of saying rejoice that you belong to God and are part of God's commonwealth. That is far more important than any success you might achieve in your work. Scholars remind us that belonging to God, being a child of God, means to pattern our attitudes after God. See the world through God's eyes, in other words.

Contrast all that with a purely secular approach to life, an approach often celebrated in our country. Instead of going out into the world as lambs among wolves, we go out more like wolves. We value strength over compassion. We often go to war to solve problems, giving up on diplomacy far too quickly.

Then there is the traveling light perspective. I hardly need to say anything here. Americans don't travel light. I include myself in this. We love our toys, our things, our cars, our large houses, our shoes.

We also live in a culture that values success over humility and faithfulness. If one approach does not lead to success, no matter how faithful that approach might be to the ethical values we share, we are encouraged to drop it. The bottom line is the only thing that counts.

And, for many Americans, including many Christians, being a citizen of this great country seems to form much more of our identity than being a citizen of God's commonwealth.

All of this is beginning to sound as if I am not in favor of being patriotic on the Fourth of July. That is far from the case. I love this country. I would not want to live anywhere else. I recognize the contrasts presented here between Jesus' advice and how we live and what we value as a culture raise complicated issues that are not black and white.

But, when a secular celebration bumps us against a spiritual message like our Luke passage, we can't help but see the tension between the two visions here. This tension does not mean we need to give up being patriotic in order to live faithfully as Christians. But it does mean we need to keep the tension ever before us.

Perhaps Donald Shriver of Union Theological Seminary, put it best in an article called "Honest Patriotism." In it he quotes William Sloane Coffin, Jr.'s distinction between

three kinds of patriots: two bad, one good. “The bad are uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.” In our polarized world in the twenty-first century, many in the United States are in danger of falling into one of the two bad categories of patriots.

Shriver goes on to quote an article in *Christianity Today*, one of the more conservative Christian periodicals, written in 2005 where the author was making a distinction between Christian faith and faith in America. It reads:

“George W. Bush is not Lord. The Declaration of Independence is not an infallible guide to Christian faith and practice. . .The American flag is not the cross. The Pledge of Allegiance is not the Creed. ‘God Bless America’ is not the Doxology.” Those distinctions are critical.

Shriver ends his article quoting U.S. Court of Appeals judge Learned Hand who, in 1944, described “the spirit of liberty” as “the spirit that is not too sure it is right.” I think that captures the humility Jesus would ask of any of his disciples.

So, on this Fourth of July Sunday when we take communion, let us strive to be good, humble patriots, remembering as well we are, first and foremost, citizens of God’s Commonwealth. As we take communion, let this be a time to commit to living in such a way that we prepare the ground for others to experience God. Amen