

SERMON (07-07-2019)

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus sent out seventy-two of his followers as an advance team to prepare people for his ministry. And he gave them power—superpower, really—to heal diseases and cast out demons. He also gave them authority to spread the word about the Kingdom of God.

They had healed people. They had cast out demons. And they had accomplished it all in Jesus' name! Jesus was pleased with their work, but he didn't want them to get big-heads because of it. "*Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you,*" he said, "*but rejoice that your names are written in heaven*"—in other words, God has done you a *really big favor!*

The disciples were rejoicing in the things they thought *they* had done. Jesus wanted them to understand that it was the power of God—the Holy Spirit—that was accomplishing these things *through* them! That's how Jesus usually operated.

Jesus could have used miracles and marvels, or his charisma and our apprehension to make his point about the Kingdom of God. He had the power to draw large crowds, and his teaching left his hearers dumbfounded. So why did he send out these seventy-two to do the work he could have done more effectively himself?

My guess is that it was for the same reason his last words to the church, recorded in *Matthew 28:18-20*, were that we should go make disciples of all nations.

Jesus sent the seventy-two out, first of all, because he knew they needed to see what he saw. They needed to feel the hurts and hear the questions from people who are living and dying without any hope for the future. We need to see the world as Jesus sees it—full of desperately hurting people who need the justice, hope and mercy of God's Kingdom.

Hurting people need more than "thoughts and prayers". They need someone to come live in their neighborhood and witness their struggles.

The seventy-two that Jesus appointed to go ahead of him needed that experience as well . . . and so do we. We need to get outside these walls to see the needs that Jesus saw.

Jesus also sent out the seventy-two to do these works of ministry because you don't really know what real joy is until you have put your faith into practice. It's one thing to believe something with your head, it's another for that belief to take residence in your psyche. That only happens when you actively practice what you preach.

Isn't that why Jesus sends us out to do his work—to give us, as it were, a "baptism" into reality? What would it look like if we brought the Kingdom of God to homeless camps in the woods and soup kitchens, to prisons and no-tell motel parking lots? Do we really believe in the justice, compassion and mercy of the kingdom of God, or do we just like to hear cheerful messages about it on Sunday? If the message of Jesus cannot

hold up when faced with the cold, hard reality of people's lives, then it's not from God.

Those seventy-two disciples Jesus sent out saw God's power in action, changing lives, and they came back from their mission overflowing with joy; and Jesus celebrated with them. He said their ministry was defeating the power of Satan on earth. And that's the third reason that Jesus sent out the seventy-two—he had given them power to expel Satan.

Now I must tell you some devout Christians believe in a literal Satan. Some do not. For some, Satan is simply a name we give to the spirit of evil that inhabits the human heart. Regardless of how we feel about Satan, all of us will agree that we live in a world where the power of hatred, injustice and cruelty are all too common. Where is hope in such a world?

It is found in those who follow Jesus out into the world. That is why Jesus sent out the seventy-two into the world...and also why he sends us. He sends us out because he knows that we need to get outside these walls to see the needs he sees. And, he sends us out because you don't really know what real joy is until you have put your faith into practice. And finally, he sends us out because sharing our faith and alleviating suffering in our community have the power to drive out all we associate with Satan, the *Prince of Darkness*.

Jesus sends us out today like he sent out the seventy-two—to plant the Kingdom of God in hearts and lives; after all, there is no superpower that can compare to the power of knowing God through Jesus. This is the power that gives life meaning and purpose. This is the power that gives us our identity and self-worth. This is the power that allows us to overcome the world. And if your life has been changed by this power, then you are called to go, to witness, and to share the Kingdom of God and the power of recovery with a hurting world.