



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**Harvest Mercy**

A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

July 11, 2010

*Fifteenth Sunday (Year C)*

**Luke 10:1-11; 16-20**

## **Luke 10:1-11; 16-20**

*Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them in pairs ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come. And He was saying to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no money belt, no bag, no shoes; and greet no one on the way. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not keep moving from house to house. Whatever city you enter and they receive you, eat what is set before you; and heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whatever city you enter and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near.'*

*The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven."*

*This is the word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.*

Our nephew, Nate, just finished his college orientation at NYU earlier this week. He and his family have lived on a naval base in Italy for the past 4 years and so he and his sisters and brother went to the school on the base; his graduating class had about 30 students in it – most of them girls.

Nate had never been to NYU to visit the school – or New York City at all, for that matter. He arrived safely – but his luggage never caught up with him while he was there and so he wore the clothes he'd put on in Sicily before he left home. He had no cell phone. And, because family wasn't included in the orientation process, he knew not a soul. Nate was in a place he'd never been – far different from where he'd spent the last 4 years of his life - in the midst of a sea of strangers, with nothing but the clothes on his back. Now, it sounds for all the world, like a recipe for disaster for an incoming freshman (it certainly would have been for me). Yet, after everything was finished he said, without a hint of sarcasm or reluctance: *Orientation was Awesome!*

Now, *I'm* inclined to be a light traveler myself – particularly when I'm traveling alone – but Nate's experience would push me to the edge: a new place, strangers surrounding me, no phone and *none* of my personal belongings. I'd be hard pressed to describe the experience as “Awesome,” I'm afraid. And so I admire Nate; it takes an adventurous spirit and a bit of creativity to go through that and come out enthusiastic on the other side.

The call to carry the ministry of Jesus out of our immediate experience, and into new places is one we hear at several points in the gospels. Matthew 28 is perhaps the most familiar text. Often called *The Great Commission*, Jesus' parting words to his followers are:

*'Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.  
And remember, I am with you always,  
to the end of the age.'*

It's one of those passages we hear often enough that we may find all or parts of it come to our lips easily when the Great Commission is mentioned.

Jesus' vision for what he asks of his disciples unfolds to us throughout the narratives describing His ministry. He calls the disciples into relationship with him, ministering to them and teaching about the power of God's love and grace to transform their lives and other's lives as well. Having been changed by Jesus themselves, and having been witnesses to what happens for others, the disciples were sent to be the venues through which Jesus' ministry flows. Of course, it's not just the disciples of Jesus' day that are sent. All of us who have experienced Jesus in our lives and who have seen God at work in our midst are sent as well.

Just a chapter earlier in Luke, Jesus sent out the twelve disciples on a similar missionary journey. When they returned, they were filled with stories about what had taken place. Now Jesus sends others on a mission beyond the region with which they are familiar. *Seventy* is one of those numbers that gives more information than an account of ‘how many.’ When Jesus calls seventy he is describing the scope of the mission and the thoroughness of it as the gospel is sent into new places.

The weightiness of the mission becomes even clearer in the Jesus instructions gives:

- \*The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few and*
- \*you are sent like lambs in the midst of wolves.*
- \*The seventy were told not to take anything with them;*
- \*and to greet no one on the way.*

These and other instructions bring out the challenges of the mission and also the focus that is required by the seventy. Even so, as we read this narrative notably absent are the ‘hows’. While Jesus gives a lot of detail about what they should do when they are received or not received, he doesn’t dwell much at all on the mundane details of how they are to spend their time away from him. He doesn’t assign tasks based on the various skills these followers have; he doesn’t ask for volunteers to go to specific places. He simply sends them off vulnerable and without provision into a world hungry for ministry.

These seventy disciples were among those who had experienced Jesus and been changed by Him. What we read about Jesus healing and ministering to the people in His midst humbles us as well when we think about the power of His ministry in our own lives and realize that we too, are sent out. But that we are sent to carry out the ministry of Jesus, without precaution or provision, ‘as lambs in the midst of wolves,’ is more than a little daunting.

Luke tells us that despite his rather daunting instructions, the 70 returned with joy and amazement at what was accomplished through their ministry in Jesus’ name. Yet, to read of their ministry is one thing; who among us feels prepared to go out and do the same?

As a sophomore moving into my junior year in college I spent a summer in Brazil, living with Presbyterian missionaries in various places. I packed carefully for the summer, taking with me everything I thought I would need to help my ministry with the Brazilian people. I knew what I was there to do, and I had big plans for my summer.

The first several weeks were terrible. I didn’t speak Portuguese, I was desperately homesick, and very confused about just what I was doing there. How would I do anything of value that summer? I was certain I’d made a mistake in applying for this *Youth in Mission* opportunity in the first place.

It took several weeks, and the gentle presence of others, but gradually my role in the plentiful harvest became clear. One week, in particular, transformed the summer. I spent it at an orphanage, armed only with my Portuguese/English dictionary; no one, including the director, spoke any English. The children were hungry for attention and love, and I found myself being used as a venue for Jesus' ministry in the most peculiar ways. As I sat with the children I discovered they longed to learn the English words for their world as much as I wanted the language to speak to them. We exchanged words at every opportunity.

One day we were in the garden which supplied much of their food. As we walked through it they taught me words for things they were growing, and where there were common vegetables, I returned the learning. After a while however, they began to bring bugs to me, teaching me their names as well. This was all right for awhile, but as the bugs they brought got progressively larger, my interest in this game grew progressively smaller. And as you can imagine, the children thought this was great fun.

There I was, thousands of miles from home, a young woman amidst a garden full of giant bugs. This was not in my plan, but as we laughed in the garden, ate and played together that week, I marveled at the power of Jesus' ministry. The men and women who lived and worked with these children day in and day out had a heart for the gospel. They loved the Lord and their love translated into an offering of themselves to the children. They cared for them and became venues of hope for children whose lives had come crashing down around them. It was my privilege to witness this, but also to both offer and receive the power of Jesus' ministry in ways I just could not have anticipated.

In August, I returned home, filled with joy; I had witnessed and become part of the ministry of Jesus in a new way. I had seen how the kingdom of God had come near that summer. And, as much as I had felt sent by Jesus to do ministry, *I returned* transformed by the experience as well.

Next Sunday we will be commissioning another group of our young people and their chaperones to a week of mission service. Our high school youth group will leave the country two weeks from today, crossing the border from California into Mexico. They will travel 200 miles along the coast of the Baja Peninsula, until they arrive in Vicente Guerrero, where they will join others and build a new home a family. None of them are carpenters; none are fluent in the language of the Oaxacan natives they will come to know. Despite these things, together they will build a house.

Yet, this is not their primary ministry. Just as the seventy were sent – so are our youth sent, 'like lambs amidst wolves,' to be witnesses to the kingdom of God breaking into the world. How this happens will be their story to tell when they return. It may be by the ways in which relationships are formed between the family and the build team; perhaps it will take the shape of games of soccer with the children in the family; maybe the broken conversations about the color of paint on the new house will lift up the presence of Jesus in their midst.

You see, I think when Jesus talks about lambs amidst the wolves he's not speaking only about the physical dangers that await us as we go out – although these may be there as well - but also about anything that gets in the way of seeing Jesus at work and joining in that work when we go out in His name. As I served in Brazil, my disappointment at what I couldn't do, and my homesickness became the wolf in my path; when we're sent on a 'work mission' the physical task we do might be the very thing that undermines the reason we are sent.

The power of Jesus' ministry is just that: it's Jesus' ministry. We are ill-equipped to do anything apart from it. If a task gets accomplished: a meal cooked, a house built, a sermon preached, a Bible lesson taught, a wound dressed: well and good. But these are never the end products in our sending. Being the venues of the love and grace of Jesus' ministry – these are the life-changing pieces of our sending.

Knowing this is what makes it possible for us to join the laborers in a plentiful harvest. We have been changed by the very ministry that we are sent out to join. We're experienced in Jesus' love and because of that we're sent to lift up the experience in new places and new ways. Let us pray,

*Jesus our Lord, send us, we pray, as lambs amidst wolves that we would become part of your ministry in new ways. Reveal to us those things which threaten to hold us back, convincing us to succumb to our fears. Show us how your love has changed our lives and grant us a hunger to be your witnesses to, with and for others. This we ask in your name, Amen.*