

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon
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Lesson: Luke 10:1-11,16-20

¹After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ²He 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. ³Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ ⁶And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷Remain 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. ⁸Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ ¹⁰But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ¹¹“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.’”

¹⁶“Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.” ¹⁷The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” ¹⁸He said to them, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. ¹⁹See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. ²⁰Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

We all know the signing of the Declaration of Independence is the reason our country celebrates the 4th of July. Most people, however, are unaware of another fascinating fact about July 4th: more presidents have died on the 4th of July than any other day of the year. Thomas Jefferson – the author of the Declaration of Independence and our nation’s third president – died in 1826 on the 4th of July. Yet, there’s more. John Adams -- who worked closely with Jefferson to draft the Declaration of Independence and who was our nation’s 2nd president -- also died on July 4th, 1826: the exact same day as Jefferson. Years prior, Adams had lost re-election to the presidency to Jefferson, and a bitter rivalry emerged. After Jefferson finished his run as president, the two of them were able to once again have a close friendship. Oddly, his friend was the subject of John Adams’ final words: “Thomas Jefferson survives.” Adams was unaware that Jefferson had actually died hours

earlier that day. There you have it: two presidents who died on the exact same day, which happened to be the 4th of July, 1826 -- the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Another coincidence is that five years later, in 1831, President James Monroe also died on July 4th. Because of these three deaths, our nation has had more presidents die on July 4th than on any other day of the year. I'm not sharing that in order to be morbid about the holiday, but to point out this interesting bit of factual information: two of the pillars of our nation's founding -- Jefferson and Adams -- happen to share the same date of death. What an amazing circumstance it is that two great figures are able to share that date.

Another interesting date came and went this past week that is often overlooked: June 29th. This day is when the Christian church annually has the Commemoration of the Apostles Peter and Paul. Now, why would it be that they share a commemoration date? Seriously. They are easily the two apostles that are easiest to name, yet they have to share a day? The other apostles don't have to share. Also, we know that these two men butted heads quite often. So why should Peter and Paul have to share the same commemoration, June 29th? If we dig into it, it is because the oldest accounts of their deaths tell us that both men were martyred at two different locations in Rome on the same date. Some ancient accounts say it was the same day in the same year. Others say it was the same day, but different years. Even though the exact details are lost to time, it is remarkable that we have very early accounts that claim that Peter and Paul died on the same date. Therefore, the church has always held their commemorations together on June 29th. It seems fitting, in some way, that we should do so. It seems clear that in history and in scripture, both men contributed significantly to the early church. Imagine how different the church throughout the ages would be if either one of these apostles had not been around. It is a reminder that the movements of greatest impact in the world's history -- good or bad -- are the result of people's collective work together.

Of course, Jesus knew that. Jesus knew that His kingdom would not spread by the work of a solitary person. Rather it would be a collective movement of people who steadily and daily lived out their calling to be a people whose lives are governed by love. The first two verses of our gospel passage say, "[Jesus] appointed seventy others and sent them ahead of him in pairs to every town and 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.'" See, Jesus knew

that the best way to establish his kingdom of love was through people. People who had been transformed by his proclamation. People who had witnessed his power displayed through acts of mercy. People who finally had hope by seeing a new kingdom – one not of this world – come to be. But who were these people? And why them? Were they people with great rhetorical training? Were they people who already held high standing in the communities that Jesus was sending them to? No. They were ordinary, nameless people. No one would claim they were well-trained or even equipped for the task. In fact, they were hardly equipped at all! They didn't even have bags, money, or sandals! Yet, there was something special about them. The passage says they were "appointed." This story is very similar -- even in grammar -- to the story in the previous chapter, where Jesus "sends" the Twelve disciples. However, Jesus doesn't "send" the seventy; he "appoints" them.

The word "appointed" was used for those in the ancient world who were sent ahead of a political ruler, and they were to be the face of the ruler until he arrived. The best term we have for it today is "ambassador." Yet, unlike ambassadors both then and today, these seventy were not from prestigious families. These seventy were not trained in diplomatic relations. They didn't have much going for them, except for two things: 1. Jesus called them to be his representatives in these communities, and 2. they had a partner in ministry. Jesus may have sent them off without much, but he did send them off with the greatest thing they needed: a partner in ministry – someone else to lean on. Someone to provide support when needed, and to receive support when needed.

Being appointed to be an ambassador can seem like a daunting task, especially if you don't feel equipped. But that is who we are... you and I: ambassadors. In our baptism, Jesus appoints us to be ambassadors of his divine rule. His reign is not like the empires and the nations of this world, where dominance is sought, might is displayed, and the pursuit of power is always justified. To have such things, the people must be controlled. Rather, living in the reign of Jesus means we renounce such things. In his kingdom, mercy and service are sought, compassion is displayed, and the pursuit of love is justified. We are sent out -- together -- to be the face and the hands of this way of life, of his kingdom. Will we find adversity? Yes. Will we ever question whether we are up to the task? Yes. Will we need others to lean on? Yes! And that is the point. We are -- collectively -- the ones "appointed."

There is a message that appears on church road-signs every now and then. It says, “God doesn’t call the equipped. God equips the called.” That is absolutely true. And the way that God equips us can be very surprising. The seventy were not given bags, money, or sandals; such things were tossed away! However, they were equipped with a partner in ministry and with a calling from God. That is exactly what we have. You might be prone to think that you don’t have the skills, or the experience, or the resources to make a great impact for God’s kingdom. But look around you here. God has equipped each of us with each other, to carry each other through this mission of being ambassadors of God’s compassion, mercy, and love. And God calls each one of us in baptism to do this work... together.

Years ago my scout troop had a week of camping in the summer heat together. We were teenagers, and we were easily becoming disgruntled with one another. Hearing all of these complaints, the scoutmaster stopped us on a hike one day. He asked us to each pick up a long stick. So we did. He asked us to break the sticks, which was easy to do. Then he asked us to drop half of the stick, while giving the other half to him. He created a bundle with those sticks, and then he asked each of us to try to break the bundle. No one could do it. Not one stick in the bundle broke. Then he said, “All of you are stronger together than you are on your own.” After that pronouncement, the rest of the week was completely different. We began to work together. We began to encourage one another. We began to enjoy having each other around. We had each other’s back. No shipments of materials gifts arrived to make our week improve. All we needed was to realize that together we are stronger.

My siblings in Christ, we lack nothing when it comes to being ambassadors of God’s compassion, mercy, and love. We might try to convince ourselves that we need more of this or more of that. But -- when it comes down to it -- God has already equipped us with everything we need. We have received a calling from God; claimed as beloved children, sent as ambassadors. And we have received each other. Out of our collective unity, God most certainly will do amazing things.

Thanks be to God. Amen.