

**“Luke 10 Ministry”**

Luke 10.1-11, 16-20

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Mason, Michigan

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It is good to be back in worship again at All Saints Lutheran Church. Last time we were here, three pastors were leading worship. Today, there’s just one. I met with some of the All Saints worship leaders a couple weeks ago so they could train me how to lead this service, and when I asked them, “So, who’s preaching?” there was a moment of stunned silence before they realized I was joking!

I remember the first time I preached at one of these ecumenical July 4 worship services, eight years ago. That was when it was just the Presbyterians and the Methodists; we hadn’t made friends with you Lutherans yet. I spoke about what it means to be a Christian and a citizen in the twenty-first century. That was a fun sermon to write; I really enjoyed it. This one’s been a lot more challenging.

See, a lot has changed in eight years. I’m really thankful that we live in the country that we live in – the land of the free and the home of the brave, still resplendent with purple mountain majesties and amber waves of grain. I’m grateful for all the freedoms we have here, for a justice system that works pretty well (most of the time), for a city that does a great job taking care of the streets and the sidewalks (come drive by my house right now to see what I mean!), and so much more. But I have to be honest: I’m worried about our country. A lot has changed in eight years, and not all of it has been good. We live in a country where more and more money is being concentrated into the hands of fewer and fewer people; a country where there is a marked lack of civil discourse about important issues that really matter; a country where shooting sprees are happening with alarming frequency; a country where the number of patients diagnosed with depression increases by about 20% every single year; a country where there are more people addicted to alcohol or drugs than people who suffer from heart disease, diabetes, or cancer; a country where more than a third of our children and youth are victims of school bullying every single year; a country where a staggering 15% of college freshmen women get raped (usually in situations in which underage drinking or illegal drugs are involved); a country where internet pornography sites get more visitors than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined.

And then ... there’s the election. Whatever your personal feelings may be about the candidates, surely we would all agree that this election is unlike *any* election we’ve seen in a *long* time ... maybe ever. Last week, conservative columnist George Will announced he was leaving the Republican party. That’s *big*. Tectonic plates are shifting, at all levels of our society. And people are afraid. There’s a lot of *fear* out there. People are voting with their hearts. There’s a lot of fear, a lot of *anger*, a lot of

*bitterness, a lot of rage. What's making Americans so afraid? So angry? So bitter? So filled with rage?*

There are those who claim that this is still the greatest nation on earth. I find myself thinking, we're an emotional *wreck*. There are those who say we're still a Christian nation. I look at us and think, *we're a spiritual disaster*. And I would argue that one of the reasons why there's so much fear and anger and bitterness and rage is because the church of Jesus Christ has failed – *failed!* – to bring *hope* and *joy* to vast numbers of American citizens. Jesus Christ – the greatest gift this world has ever seen – offers freedom to those in bondage, life to those who are dead, hope to those who are crushed, healing to those who are hurting, restoration to those who are broken, and transformation to those who need a major course correction. I firmly believe that if we were *really* doing a good job offering Jesus to people outside the walls of our church buildings, all those social issues I just mentioned (and lots more besides) would be *dramatically* reduced in frequency. *Dramatically* reduced! If people are truly filled (not just on a superficial level) with the *hope* and the *joy* of the gospel, they don't go around shooting people, raping women, bullying classmates, or needing to get high or look at porn to feel good about life. One of our primary jobs as Christians is to share Jesus with the world – and the fact that our country is *plagued* by major social issues suggests to me, very strongly, that we've not been doing that well.

Which brings me to our gospel passage. Jesus sends out 70 disciples to do ministry in his name. Jesus had his inner circle of twelve apostles, but there were many others who followed him, and what we're looking at here is a second group of people who had found *life* in Jesus, life that was so much better than what they had previously been living. Jesus hand-picks seventy and sends them, in pairs, to places where he himself hasn't been yet, places that don't yet know the hope and the joy of the gospel, places that haven't yet experienced the grace and the kingdom power of Jesus Christ. He sends them to people's *homes*, to complete *strangers*. Kind of like what the Jehovah's Witnesses do, knocking door to door, but these people aren't carrying any religious tracts with them; they're not trying to convert people to their religion. They're simply offering *peace*. The peace of Jesus Christ. The peace that looks like freedom to the bound, life to the dead, hope to the crushed, healing to the hurt, restoration to the broken, transformation to those who need a course-correction. They're offering the *gospel*, in all its fullness, not so much with *words* but more with *power*. The power of Jesus. They are doing the *same exact things* that Jesus himself has been doing in town after town: healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons – the kind of things that motivate people to follow Jesus in the first place.

These seventy disciples return to Jesus *jubilant*. They have seen God *work*. "Lord," they cry out, "in your name even the demons submit to us!" Jesus knew they would be successful at this. If only they believed it for themselves. They are going right up against the spiritual powers of darkness, and *triumphing over it*. How many people did they free from bondage (addiction, depression, pornography)? How many people did they raise from death (cynicism, giving up on God)? How many people did they bring hope to (those whose marriage had crumbled, those who had lost someone near and dear to their heart)? How many people did they heal (heart disease, diabetes, cancer)? How many people did they restore to their God-given glory (victims of domestic violence or sexual abuse)? How many people were equipped to transform their lives (those who steal, lie, cheat, abuse; those who are completely ready to give up on living)? The text doesn't give us numbers, but I bet it was a lot. It's amazing what a small number of people can do, when they wield the power of Jesus Christ against the very forces of *hell*.

Imagine for a minute. Imagine if every church in this country were to send seventy of its members – or, if it's a big church, 700 – to do what Jesus sent his disciples to do, here in Luke 10. Imagine all that *freedom*, all that *life*, all that *hope*, all that *healing*, all that *restoration*, all that *transformation*. Imagine all the *joy* and *hope* that would have touched house, after house, after house.

And then imagine how different our country might be.

See, we often make a critical mistake in our churches. We wait for people to show up. Then, if we're reasonably good at hospitality, we'll try to remember their names, and we'll encourage them to come back the following week. And we hope that they'll like our worship services, and the programs that we offer, and the music, and the classes, and the preaching, and that they'll sooner or later decide that they want to join *our* church. Sometimes we'll even advertise, to get people to come to church.

Friends, this is *not* how Jesus and his disciples went about building up the kingdom of God twenty centuries ago. They weren't waiting for people to show up in worship. No – Jesus and his disciples had a completely different strategy, a completely different kingdom agenda. They wanted to offer freedom and life and hope and healing and restoration and transformation to people who *desperately needed those things in their lives*. They weren't going to the people who were already singing and dancing God's praises, to the people who were showing up for worship. No – they were reaching out to the hurting, the broken, the lost. They were going, I'll wager, to the people who didn't have any *desire* to worship God. To people who, maybe, had *lost whatever faith they once had had*, because of the hard, cruel realities of life. To people who weren't looking for a church. To people who needed to know, to believe, to *experience firsthand* the *hope* and the *joy* of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus sent these ambassadors of the gospel out into the world *to reach people's hearts*. He didn't send them with handouts – food or clothing to give away. He didn't send them with intellectual arguments – to try to persuade them with a head trip that there really is a God. He sent them out with the *power* of his *name*. “Lord, in your name even the *demons* submit to us!” Hearts were touched. Lives were changed. Joy and hope filled house after house. People had a reason to believe in God again.

Just yesterday I heard a story, a true story, about a church down in Indiana. Ten years ago this church had less than 50 members. It was dying a long, slow death. Today, this church has nearly doubled its size, and brand-new Christians are showing up all the time. What made the difference? They started touching people's hearts. They started changing people's lives. Specifically, they launched a Christian-based ministry that helps people recover from addictions. That didn't happen easily; there was a *big* fight; some members didn't want *those* people to start showing up (as if Jesus hadn't died for them too); the pastor nearly got himself crucified in the process. But when the dust settled, and the new ministry was in place, new people started showing up, and that church is more alive than it's been in a *long* time. Why? Because they figured out how to be *relevant*. How to offer the hope and the joy of the gospel, in all its fullness, in the power of Jesus Christ, to people in town who were longing for freedom from bondage. Turns out there were a *lot* of people looking for freedom from bondage.

You know, we mainline Protestants, there are some things we're really good at. We're good at offering food to the hungry. We're good at raising money and giving it to worthy causes. We're good at

welcoming different types of people. Our inner city churches are good at helping the homeless. But there are some things we're not very good at, and one of them is what I would call "Luke 10 ministry" – reaching out to people right in our neighborhoods, offering the *hope* and the *joy* of the gospel in all its fullness, ministering to people *where they're at*, with all their fear and anger and rage and brokenness and hurt and addictions and struggles, heart to heart, face to face, with the *power* of Jesus Christ. And we need to *get* good at it, if we want our churches to survive and thrive. We need to be *relevant* to the very real issues people are struggling with, *right here in Mason*, offering the freedom, and the life, and the hope, and the healing, and the restoration, and the transformation, *that Jesus himself offers*.

You know how many people I know *right here* who are dealing with depression? Addiction? Marital struggles? Parents who discover that their kids are looking at internet porn – or who are looking at it themselves? I heard another one this past week: a mom who discovered that her young teenage daughter had been viewing, with her friends. What are we – the church – doing about *any* of that?

A week ago I had lunch with a few buddies, some good Christian men. One of the guys had brought a friend. We were talking about stuff. *Real* stuff. Not politics, not even religion, though Jesus was mentioned numerous times. No, we were talking about *heart* stuff – what's really going on in our lives: struggles, challenges, temptations, a job that didn't come through. After a little while the new guy started opening up, a little cautiously at first. With anguish on his face and fighting back tears, he started talking about his marriage. There was anger, heartache, pain – he was seriously thinking about just calling it quits. He'd already been to see a divorce attorney. We listened. We started asking him some questions. Hard questions. *Really* hard questions. More and more pieces of his story came out. We offered a few suggestions but mainly what we did was we challenged him. We challenged him to *think* about what he was doing. We challenged him to look at other options. We challenged him to *grow*. Two days ago, he sent me an update by text: he and his wife have headed off on a weekend getaway together. No kids. Just the two of them, alone together for a weekend, for the first time in *eighteen years*, to try to work through some really hard stuff and rekindle the love that they used to feel for each other. It's a little too soon to say how this one's going to turn out, but what I know is this: ninety minutes of face-to-face, heart-to-heart conversation, with a bunch of guys who care about Jesus, and who care about him, may have been the critical turning point in the life of this man and his family.

There are people hurting and broken all over the place. Jesus sends his disciples out in pairs – and sometimes in small groups – to break the forces of darkness and set people free, in his name. What would happen if each of our churches got serious about doing *that* kind of ministry? If churches all over our *nation* got serious about doing that kind of ministry? *Luke 10* ministry? How different would our country be? How much more hope? How much more *joy*? How much more *freedom* and *life*? How many hearts touched, how many lives changed? How much less *bad news* for the media to report?

It doesn't have to cost a dime. All we need are a few people who believe in Jesus, who place their hope in the gospel, who have some spiritual maturity and wisdom, and who care about people who are hurting. Actually, it boils down to just two essential ingredients: the gospel of Jesus Christ on the one hand, and your heart on the other. You'd be *amazed* what you can do with those two things.

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