

“Taking the Gospel Out”

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Rev. Bill Pinches

at All Saints Lutheran Church

Mason, Michigan

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It is good to be with all of you again, on this, our annual Fourth of July weekend celebration with All Saints Lutheran Church, Mason First United Methodist Church, and Mason First Presbyterian Church. I saw some of you at our ecumenical Vacation Bible School a week and a half ago, and I want to thank all the staff, volunteers, and helpers who made that week a success. I also want to thank the members and staff at All Saints for welcoming us here for *this* occasion once again. We are delighted to be here again.

A special word of welcome goes out to Rev. Suzanne Goodwin, the new pastor over at Mason First United Methodist Church. This is her first Sunday on the job! Suzanne, there are a few things you should know about us. First, Mason is the best place to live in the whole United States. Well, okay, it's not Mayberry, but it's pretty darn close! Great people, great churches, fabulous neighbors, a wonderful downtown, lots of things within easy walking distance, beautiful fields all around us, and all the cultural and educational opportunities of Lansing and East Lansing just a stone's throw away. (Go Green!)

The second thing Suzanne needs to know is that we don't ordinarily get torrential downpours during the annual Fourth of July parade. I got to watch the parade from inside my house, due to the re-routing because of the mess on Jefferson Street, and everybody was *soaked*! It normally doesn't rain. And the parade is usually longer. A *lot* longer. That line of tractors usually goes on, and on, and on!

Finally, the fireworks. From where we were sitting in the Steele Street School parking lot, there seemed to be some *long* pauses during the fireworks this year. Some people thought it was over, and left! It's usually more spectacular than that. I talked about the fireworks in my first Fourth-of-July-weekend sermon here in Mason, eleven years ago; I compared the Mason fireworks with a Fourth-of-July fireworks display I had seen a few years earlier in Washington, DC, sitting with my son on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial. That show was impressive, but – as I said, eleven years ago – “I think Mason may have Washington beat!” I don't think we beat Washington this year. Ordinarily we do!

But we're not primarily here to talk about the Fourth of July, as important an event as that is in the history and heritage of our country. Independence, freedom, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;” “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [and women] are created equal;” “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore; send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden

door!"; "I have a dream this afternoon that the brotherhood of man will become a reality in this day" – all of that is part of our rich heritage, our *treasured* heritage; core values and principles that we hold near and dear to our hearts ... and I fervently hope and pray that as time continues to march on that our country does not lose sight of those values, does not compromise those values, does not substitute those values with other, less democratic, less egalitarian, less *loving* values. I would like to hope that we would never let that happen, but I gotta say, sometimes, when I listen to the news, I get worried.

But fundamentally, we're here today because we are Christians, fellow sisters and brothers in Christ, setting aside our denominational differences to worship our common Lord. It is because of *him* that we gather every Sunday morning, celebrating his resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is because of *who he is* that we listen to his Word. It is because of *what he accomplished* that we bow before him in reverence, thanksgiving, and praise. It is because of *what he is doing right now* that we lift up our heartfelt prayers. And it is because of *what he will do in the future* that we are filled with hope.

In our gospel passage this morning, Jesus sends his disciples out, two by two, to do ministry in his name, to bring the kingdom of God to people who haven't had the opportunity to meet Jesus face-to-face. It's not just the twelve apostles – Peter and James and John and the rest – no, this is a whole group of *seventy* who have been following Jesus, who have committed themselves to his cause. We don't know all their names, though there have been attempts over the centuries to try to identify them all, using clues from the rest of the New Testament. Whoever they were, Jesus sends them out, thirty-five groups of two people each. Kind of like what the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses do today.

Now, why would Jesus do this? What was he trying to accomplish? Well, he probably had several purposes. Some of them are explicit in the text. *Bring peace to each house. Cure the sick. Announce the arrival of the kingdom of God.* Other purposes may be less explicit. I'm inclined to think that he sent them out, in part, to increase their *own* faith, to boost their *own* confidence in the gospel. There were also a lot of *needs* out there, a lot of hurting people, a lot of desperation. You remember how many people Jesus healed from various diseases as he traveled from place to place. You recall how frequently he cast demons out of people. You remember how many people wanted to listen to his word, because it was so life-giving, so enriching, so *different* from what so many of the rich and powerful were saying. And you recall how often Jesus would face people whose lives were fundamentally opposed to the gospel – people who argued with him, people who refused to listen to him, people who, eventually, did him in. The world was *messed up* ... and Jesus was working to set it right.

That's not a job he could do on his own. He needed help. He needed some folks who were willing to try doing some of the very same things that he himself was doing. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." Jesus needs people who are willing to help him bring the kingdom of God to people and places it hasn't reached yet. There were plenty of such people and places back then.

And ... guess what ... there are plenty of such people and places here and now.

I don't know if you've noticed – but our world is kind of messed up. A lot of *people* are kind of messed up. A lot of people are living aimlessly, recklessly, selfishly, greedily, self-centeredly. (Have you noticed?) I was at Meijer this past week, standing in line at Customer Service, when one of the

employees brought in a cart filled with junk that somebody had abandoned over by the Garden Center. Empty food containers, used water bottles, a variety of other such things – it looked like someone had thrown a party, and then just left their junk behind. In a cart. Outside Meijer. Leaving it for someone *else* to clean up. Really thoughtful, wasn't it? ... I'm driving down the highway. I'm passing another car. From out of nowhere, another car comes barreling up behind me, sits right on my tail, flashes its lights, motions for me to get out of the way. Because, clearly, this is *their* lane, and *I'm* in their way, and – just as clearly – *their* need to get where they are going is greater than *my* need to get where *I'm* going. (Why does it feel like that happens *every single time* I'm out on the interstate for any length of time?) ... I'm riding my bike, enjoying a nice summer Saturday morning, a year or two ago, down by Portage Lake. I'm following the rules and recommendations, I'm wearing a helmet, I've got a blinking red light on my frame, I'm in the right lane, near the side of the road; there's plenty of room for cars to go around me. A pick-up truck passes me, with two guys in it; the guy in the passenger seat reaches his arm out the window and gives me the finger. Seriously! ... And just last night, I get a call from the director up at our church camp, informing me that some heavily inebriated boaters ran their boat over the buoys surrounding the swim area, dragged the anchor *way* out of place, and got their boat tangled up in the rope. The camp had to call the police and file a report. ... Four little vignettes, and I'm sure you could add *dozens* more. What is it with people? Doesn't the gospel of Jesus Christ have something to say about *each one* of those situations? Do people not *know* the gospel? Or do they simply not *care*?

It's not just individual people. It's our whole *culture*. I've got a female friend who, when she got divorced a few years ago, received selfies from three different men who were interested in her. *Nude* selfies. Because apparently, in our culture today, that's *what people do* when they are trying to get a date. Seriously! One of the most popular shows on TV features copious amounts of nudity and nearly pornographic sex in almost every episode. Explicit sex scenes that *weren't in the book* the TV show is based on were *added in* for TV. Because, apparently, that's what Americans like to watch. Seriously!

There are something like 300,000 or 350,000 Christian congregations in the United States. We've got over a dozen right here in Mason. Generally speaking, people don't have to go far to find a church. We make sure we're visible – we've got a sign out front, telling people when our service times are; we're on the internet, so people can find us online; we're in the phone book; maybe we even advertise in the newspaper. And people are just beating down our doors, right?

Wrong. The Presbyterian Church has been in steady decline since 1965. The Methodist and Lutheran churches are on a similar trajectory. Every year, *thousands* of churches close, or merge with other small churches. When I arrived here there were 70 churches in my presbytery, our regional grouping of churches. Now there are 63. That's a 10% loss. Most of the remaining churches have shrunk considerably during that time. I suspect the Methodists and Lutherans could tell a similar story.

In case you haven't noticed ... people aren't flocking to our churches. Signs, websites, advertisements ... they all assume that people are *looking* for our churches. *What if people aren't?*

What if it's the case that many people in our country today – maybe even a *majority* – *just aren't looking for a church to join?* What if they're quite happy (or they *think* they're quite happy) living

a life of quiet indifference, or passionate hostility? Often people are more interested in listening to what their *own* version of “common sense” says, rather than what *Jesus* has to say. Often Jesus says things that challenge people, or make them feel uncomfortable – and, Lord knows, lots of people today don’t like feeling uncomfortable. Sometimes people don’t even *know* about Jesus, in any meaningful way. I have a colleague here in Michigan whose daughter recently played Jesus in a high school production of *Godspell*. Most members of the cast didn’t know the gospel story *at all*. When they were doing the initial read-through, some of them expressed shock and surprise. “Oh, this is so sad,” they exclaimed – “*he dies!!!*” I’m not kidding; these high school students *didn’t know that Jesus got killed!*

Why didn’t they know? We’ve got hundreds of thousands of churches in this country, all telling the same basic story. Yet we’ve got a whole generation of people *who don’t know the basics*. We’re proclaiming the message – but *who’s hearing it?* For the most part, *only the people who are already sitting in our pews on Sunday morning*. There’s a whole world out there – here in our country – *here in our city!* – that’s not being reached. Maybe some folks who live *right down your street*.

Who’s going to take the gospel *to them?*

What if ... what if Jesus is entrusting that responsibility *to us?* What if that’s one of the things we’ve been supposed to do, all along? What if that passage in Luke is about what *we* should be doing?

If you think back to the book of Acts, that series of stories that takes place after Jesus is raised from the dead, where most of the *action* takes place? Where are most of the *connections* made, that bring people to Jesus? There’s a lame man, sitting outside the gate of the temple. There’s an Ethiopian, traveling home in a carriage. There’s a Roman centurion, entertaining guests in his home. There’s a woman merchant, sitting by a riverbank. Have you noticed that most of the stories about people who started following Jesus *don’t take place in a church or a temple or a synagogue?* They take place *outside the church walls*. The apostles took the gospel *out*. And that brought people *in*.

Do we actively take the gospel *out?* Or do we just expect people to come *in?*

If our churches have a prayer of thriving in the 21st century ... if *the gospel of Jesus Christ* is going to reach the people that it *really needs to reach* ... we’re going to have to get better at *taking the gospel out*. We’re going to have to learn how to do what those 70 disciples did, *bringing the kingdom of God near* to people who don’t know Jesus. We may not *want* to do it. We may not *feel* like doing it. We may not think *we have the gifts* for it. But those 70 probably didn’t think that they did either. When they came back to Jesus, they expressed *surprise*: “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!”

They came back *joyful*. They had made a difference. Lives had been changed. And they *knew* it.

Friends, we’re not going to change many lives if all we do is sit in our familiar pews on Sunday mornings. The lives that most need to be changed probably aren’t in here. *They’re out there*.

We need to do what those disciples did. Take the gospel *out*. Bring the kingdom of God *near*.

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