

Hymnody Sermon Series: "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 (NRSV)
Rev. Michele Ward Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church
Baltimore, MD July 3, 2022

The scripture reading today comes from Luke's Gospel.

Listen now for a word from God.

After 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.

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. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.

Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain 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. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'

But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, '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.' "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!"

He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

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Jesus sounds like the worst travel adviser. He tells his disciples to go out on their journey with nothing. No purse with money. No bag with necessities like extra food or clothes. No sandals on their feet. Even worse, he tells them to be completely quiet and not say a word to anyone on the road while they are traveling. Now, if I told all of us to take off our shoes and walk to Towson with nothing, literally nothing but the clothes on our backs, I highly doubt you would take me up on that, right? If I told you to keep to yourself and never say hello or acknowledge anyone else on your walk from Baltimore to Towson, I imagine you would find that to be a bit rude or strange.

Then, Jesus tells them to walk up to people’s houses in that state and give them all a greeting of peace. In Jesus’s time and place, a house receiving a guest or stranger requesting hospitality could not turn them away. He further instructs them to stay in that house the entire time they are in that town, eating and drinking whatever people offer, healing the sick, and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to them.

Of course, there will be people who reject them, Jesus explains. So make sure to be ready when and if they do. To prepare for that rejection, think about what it would be like to say, “I reject even the very dirt from the streets of your town, the dirt stuck to my sandal-less feet! God has still come near to you, even though you rejected us, God’s messengers.

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Jesus reassures them that they are powerful, and nothing can harm them, even when they walk out into the world with nothing but the clothes they are wearing. The physical trappings they rely on do not protect them. No money, no bag, no food, no shoes - themselves and God’s power, the power that fills them with the ability to heal and to teach, to cure and to preach, to withstand evil and remain free from pain.

When I hear this antithesis to a packing list, I cannot help but feel some panic rise within my chest. What do you mean, Jesus, by telling us not to take anything at all out into the world? How could we ever walk up to a stranger's door wearing no shoes and expect them to let us into their homes, feed us, house us? How could we ever choose to be that vulnerable and in need of help? And why would you want us to begin relationships with someone like that? Aren't you full of power? Don't you want us to arrive into town with a little more pomp and circumstance instead of showing up like a beggar?

Jesus isn't listening to us. Instead, he asks us to do something infinitely more difficult. He asks us to trust him, and to trust strangers with our well being. He asks us to trust the power that lives deep within us. The power to extend peace. The power to ask for what we need. The power to heal others. If the disciples took everything they needed with them, they have the danger of entering town with arrogance. They have the danger of walking up to the doors of strangers and saying, “I have exactly what you need for a better life. Listen to

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me, someone you have never met before, tell you everything you need to know so your life can be as wonderful as my life.” I highly doubt that would go as well, but that is the way the majority of Christians have tried to go about sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others. Through a sense of entitlement and arrogance rather than a sense of humility, peace, and receptivity, Christians enter foreign territory and assume that we know the answers, as if no one else has thought of how to live and be and love before we have thought about those deeply human concepts.

The United States approaches the good news of democracy in the same way in the international community. In countless wars in foreign countries, like Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq, to name a few - the United States arrives on the scene declaring our way of governing and way of life is best suited for an entirely different culture, people, and place. We insert ourselves into conflicts we have no right to participate in. Our arrogance sends our military forces out in droves, purporting we bring justice and peace with us, liberty and freedom for all. And yet we bring more death, more bombed out cities, more displaced families, more traumatized children, more refugee camps, more polluted land and water, and more puppet governments. This is not the way that Jesus sends out his disciples. Why do we think this is the way we must go when we engage with other countries?

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The marriage between church and state gave birth to Christian nationalism in the United States, and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” is the love song that this marriage relies on to maintain its spark. I have seen the damage this love song does to veterans when they return from war. I was a chaplain resident for six months at the VA hospital in Seattle, Wa. I worked with patients in the senior care wing, the rehabilitation unit, and spinal cord injury patients. Many of them suffered greatly with reconciling their belief that God had sent them to war. That the United States was the good news for the world, and all of the wars and people they killed were for good reasons. They needed to believe that the wars they fought were holy.

The most hollow words a soldier hears when they return from war are “Thank you for your service.” The everyday citizen does not understand what it is like to kill someone on a battlefield or realize they bombed out a civilian’s home instead of the purported terrorist’s hideout, killing an innocent family. “Thank you for your service” is like saying, “thank you for committing murder on my behalf so I didn’t have to do it myself.” I heard stories of what it was like to return home to the disdain of their fellow Americans, the immense guilt that comes with taking human lives, the exhausting mental gymnastics to rationalize all of the violence and pain.

Imagine, for a moment, what this type of belief system does to someone’s relationship with God, with themselves, with others. It justifies all sorts of

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horrors that the human soul cannot and should not bear. It begs the question, “Why would God want me to do that? Am I a bad person because I did that? How do I ask God for forgiveness for something that I was doing for God and country when God and my country asked me to do it in the first place?”

We will sing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” very shortly. I want us all to sing the words out loud. I want us to hear the words coming out of our mouths. I want us to imagine the millions of soldiers since the Civil War who have sung this hymn to prepare themselves for battle, to keep up their hope, to continue to persevere in times of distress. The hymn boldly declares, “His truth is marching on.” When I think about the disciples walking into towns where they do not know a single soul with nothing but the clothes they are wearing, I do not hear them singing this song. They boldly declare the words of Jesus Christ, “Peace to this house! The Kingdom of God has come near!” What would happen if this was the song we sang? A song of peace and welcome, receptivity and vulnerability, hospitality and healing?

No longer would we sing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” We would sing “The Healing Hymn of the Kingdom.”