

To Be A New Church, Conclusion: Sent
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Luke 10:1-11

Today we conclude a series of sermons considering the future of the Church at large in America. However, I trust that this is only the beginning of broader conversation and ongoing dialogue on that topic.

For the last four weeks, we've been grappling with a range of complex issues facing the Church in America, especially the mainline Protestant church that has been shrinking for decades. Some of these issues come from our past – specifically how we have, and haven't, dealt with race. Others relate to our future – specifically the growing pluralism and multiculturalism of our nation and how younger generations of Americans view this post-modern world of ours.

Today, as our nation celebrates its 234th birthday, we're reminded that America was started as a great experiment. Personally, I like to think about our national experience in those terms. We agree, at least most of us, "that all (people) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." We're still experimenting with how to make good on that promise.

Today the Church is still a central part of our national experience. But we're keenly aware of the speed of change in the world around us – including both the shrunken influence of the Protestant Church in Europe and, at the same time, the explosion of the Church south of the equator.

Having delved into questions about the future of the Church in America, I feel the need to be absolutely clear about one thing; that is, whose hands the Church rests in as this swirl of post-modern change happens around us. As people of the Church, we are called to pay close attention to the realities of the world. That includes changing demographics in America, the readiness, or lack of it, of the Church to embrace change and the equally important call on the church to know what not to change.

At times, we are all prone to try to prescribe a "solution" or a "strategy" for the survival of the Church we love so much. But, as with America and all peoples and all nations for

that matter, the Church rests safely in God's hands. And, aside from the assurance of our salvation in Christ Jesus, that may be the best news we hear today.

So, how do we go forward? How do we strike that delicate balance of seeking to be agents of our Lord without presuming we have THE answer, if we have any answer at all?

The gospel of Luke reminds us that there are two parts to the life of faith, which is just another way of saying a life with Jesus. We are called and we are sent.

In these last weeks, we've heard Luke's account of how Jesus preaches, teaches and performs miracles. He calms a storm as he and his disciples cross over from Galilee and he casts demons out of a man. There are other stories in these same chapters – stories of how Jesus heals a woman from years of bleeding and raises a girl from the dead.

In Luke's telling of these stories, the disciples are with Jesus. By and through his presence, they are shaped, formed, inspired and called to follow him. As followers of Christ ourselves, we are with the disciples as they are with Jesus. And we are with Jesus now, fed and called in our own worship, study, prayer and life together.

The second part of the life of faith is that we are sent. The two aspects of the Christian life are inseparable. As one scholar writes, "missions and evangelism are the natural result of worship, nurture and piety."¹

So it is with Christ's followers in Luke. The story of the sending of the 70 that we heard a moment ago provides several timeless truths about the life in the mission of the church ... truths worth noting as we pray that God will use us in the years to come, whatever lies in store in God's providence for us and the Church in America.

Christ imbues his followers with a sense of great urgency about their mission. He uses the metaphor of the harvest. As any farmer knows, the season of harvest is not one for lollygagging around.

Christ also told those he sent that the laborers were few. He said they would be like lambs among wolves. In other words, he said, "It can be a tough world out there. Watch yourself."

¹ Alan Culpepper, New Interpreter's Bible Commentary on Luke, p. 197

He told those he sent to pack lightly. “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals,” he said. And, Christ said, stay focused, so focused that his followers should not even stop to greet a passerby on the road. Sounds like a tough assignment, right?

But that was not all Christ said. He told them the harvest would be plentiful He told them to pray – and that their prayers would be answered with enough laborers to do the job. He reassured them their needs would be met.

Still, it seems fair to ask, was that enough to convince them to go out into the world, a world they knew would be hostile toward the word they preached?

Are those assurances enough for us today as we look out at our 21st-century world, hostile in its own ways, still fraught with division and fractured by our differences?

Jesus’ assurances must have been enough because the 70 did go out to heal the sick and preach the word. They must have been sufficiently fed and inspired and called in their time with Christ. It must have been enough that Christ promised that their needs would be met. But that was not all. When Christ sent the 70, he told them to say to all who would listen, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.”

And when the 70 returned, as told in the chapters that follow today’s reading, they returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!”

Then, as now, there were demons and differences among the people and the nations. Then, as now, deep and unsettling change was afoot in the world. Then, as now, Christ’s followers stepped out into a cultural swirl that raised questions in the hearts of God’s people about the future of their faith and the institutions that carried its standard.

But ... then, as now, Christ’s followers were given the words to say, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” in Christ Jesus. Then, as now, Jesus fed them with the bread and the cup, the sacraments we celebrate today.

And ever since, in every time and place and era, Christ Jesus has dwelt with all those he sends in and through the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit, as we will say in a few moments, that gives us courage in a broken and fearful world to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in the church and culture, to hear the voices of people long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom and peace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.