

That was Then, This is Now

A sermon by John Strommen on Luke 10:1-11,16-20 July 7, 2019

As some of you have experienced, I am a proponent of the practice called dwelling in the Word. This is a practice that invites each person to listen to a text that is read and pay attention to what captures your imagination. Specifically, what speaks to you, or, for Facebook users, what do you “like”? Also, what questions do you have? What makes you call, “timeout!” Then we listen to what each of us heard or wondered about.

The practice of dwelling is based on the conviction that God speaks to each of us through biblical passages, whether we have much biblical training or not. The Bible is not merely information, it is direct address – but it does come to us through strange stories and commands.

(slide 1: “How am I supposed to know what this means?”)

One of the challenges of this approach, as we’ve discovered, is that many people today, when they read the Bible, feel like they’re reading something pretty inaccessible, because these words were written two thousand years ago in and for a culture radically different from our own. So, when I say, “how does this speak to you?” the answer is often, “Well, how am I supposed to know what this means? All I have are questions.” Today’s text from Luke is an example of a head scratcher like this. It may elicit far more “timeouts” than “likes.”

There’s a saying that seminary professors would use with students: first address what a text *meant*, then address what it *means*.

(slide 2: “What *did* it mean? What *does* it mean?”)

Until you have some sense what verses meant in their original context – what it meant – it’s hard to know what the verses mean for us today. You see, the words in the Bible are not automatically speaking directly to you. They are, first of all, words that tell us about a conversation God had with God’s people in a very different time and place, and not everything carries over without reinterpretation. The main idea behind the verses is probably very relevant for today, but it will to be reapplied.

So, we will spend some time this morning addressing what the context was for these words of Jesus and why, for instance, Jesus asked those he sent out to *speak to no one on the road*. Strange way to start a mission!

After we ask, “what *did* it mean?”, I will ask, “What *does* it mean – for today?” Put another way, are there themes or ideas here that still apply to us today, even though those ideas may be carried out in a very different way?

(slide 3: “from 1 to 12 to 70...and beyond!”)

What did it mean? Well, in the previous chapter of Luke, Jesus did a bold thing and shifted from himself alone doing the ministry to sending out his 12 disciples to heal people, drive out demons and proclaim the kingdom of God. Then in chapter 10, he sends out 70 people. Clearly, Jesus is beginning to pass on his mission to his followers in such a way that they are not simply following, but they are sharing in the mission. They are being sent. And Jesus has just moved from sending his inner-circle (the church council)

to sending possibly all his followers to go out ahead of him and prepare the way for his visit. These verses anticipate the forming of the church.

Jesus tells them the harvest is plentiful, and this is a metaphor that builds on earlier passages like the parable of the sower. Here he's not telling his followers to go out and plant seeds. That is always a good thing to do, don't get me wrong. Rather, Jesus is here assuming that God is already loose and at work in the world by the power of God's Holy Spirit, and God has been at work sowing seeds, cultivating, etc. And now it is time to reap the harvest, i.e., make a connection, form a relationship, with those who are ready to receive the word of God or in whom the Spirit of God is already at work. In a world where people assumed God involved in human affairs, this was a rather bold idea that God was loose in the everyday world, and that the world needed what God had to offer!

(slide 4: "An opportunity to trust and to receive")

The seventy were to go out as lambs among wolves, and to take no purse, no sandals, no cloak. Why would Jesus send them out unprepared and vulnerable? This was an invitation to trust that God will provide. If comfort and security are your main objectives, this mission was not for you!

Furthermore, it meant that the hospitality necessary would be received by them, not given.

How about "greet no one on the road"?

(slide 5: "So much for being friendly")

Why do you suppose that's there? Focus. Singleness of purpose. Don't get distracted!

Go up to a house and say, "Peace to this house," and if anyone is there who shares in your peace, your peace will rest on them. If not, it will return to you."

We've all had the experience of greeting someone and feeling that they received us, they were open to us. That makes subsequent conversation easier. Conversely, we've all had the experience of being rejected. Our peace did not rest on that person. What do you do when that happens? You find someone else to talk to! So, too, in our passage. If your peace returns to you, i.e., you are rejected, the clear implication is that you move on. But if your peace is received, you remain with those people.

(slide 6: "more going on with this peace than we thought")

Interesting, too, the concept of peace. Is it possible the peace being referred to here is not just my well-intended greeting, but something more? Perhaps the peace is the peace of God – the peace that is given to his followers; but also a peace that is to be found in others out there.

Jesus then instructs the 70 to eat what is set before them, because the laborer deserves to be paid. This seems to assume that the guests will be sharing work together: perhaps assisting with whatever the host does to make a living.

(slide 7: "Church's mission in a nutshell: table fellowship, loving neighbor, declare God's Kingdom")

Cure the sick, and tell them, "the kingdom of God has come near to you." This is a sure sign that God's power is with them, for they are given the power to cure the sick. It also echoes exactly what Jesus' ministry was all about, these three themes:

- Creating table fellowship – eating together – with one another.
- Tending to our neighbor’s physical and earthly needs.
- Declaring that “the kingdom of God has come near to you.” God in Jesus is at work reconciling the world to Godself.

These three encapsulate what the church did and does: fellowship, love, proclamation.

So, now the question is, what is relevant in this story? Pull out your list. Here’s my take on what Luke 10 teaches. Which ones do you think are the most important? Which ones are the hardest?

1) FERTILE SOIL: (slide 8)

The story of Luke 10 affirms the world’s need for God’s mission. The harvest is plentiful. That means people out there, for all their doubts about organized religion, are still looking for meaningful relationships, purpose in life, and a vibrant spirituality. How can we help them address these needs?

2) ALL, NOT SOME: (slide 9)

We have thought for a long time that it was just certain people, a designated few, who were sent out in mission. Churches that think that way – and there are many – have no future. Mission is done by all of us. Where does God send you?

3) TAKIN’ IT TO THE STREETS: (slide 10)

Most of the time, we think our primary task is to attract people out there to us - here. Luke 10 asks us to consider something very new to us: that God is already at work in the neighborhood and we can join him there. If we only think God is here at church, we will have a truncated, insufficient experience of God! It also means we don’t wait for harvest to come to us, we go out to reap the harvest.

4) PRAY: (slide 11)

Jesus says, “ask the Lord of the harvest to send laborers out.” This is a call to prayer, which I think is still relevant – prayer not just for me and my own, but the world.

5) TRUST: (slide 12)

Sent out as lambs with no purse, no bag, no sandals. As mentioned earlier, this is all about learning to trust in God’s providence, not our own preparations or need for security. It also establishes that those going out will be dependent on someone else’s hospitality. That means they are not in control, but must be able to receive. What gets in the way of you trusting God?

6) FOCUS: (slide 13)

We are called to be focused. Many churches today have no focus other than just try to do good things. As a result, our energy gets dissipated in every which direction. Clarity of purpose is not a bad thing! It gives you permission to say no to things, and that can be a real gift. What is God leading you to focus on? How about let go?

7) PEOPLE OF PEACE: (slide 14)

No matter how we do it, the first purpose is to find people of peace. That establishes the connection. It likely will not mean knocking on doors, although it might. It probably won't mean staying in our neighbor's house with them. It very well might mean working on something together with them. Who are those people for us with whom we can find fellowship and common cause?

8) FELLOWSHIP, LOVE, HOPE: (slide 15)

The purpose of our mission, once peace is established, is find table fellowship, tend to physical needs, declare the kingdom of God. How can we build on meal fellowship to love our neighbor and point to God's presence?

9) GET BACK ON THE HORSE: (slide 16)

Often there is failure! If so, move on, but know that the kingdom has still drawn near.

May we all be students of Luke 10 and what it teaches! Amen.