

4th Sunday after Pentecost, July 3, 2022
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm reading two books at the moment, both on religious themes, but each quite different from the other. One is called *Jesus and John Wayne*. It's a history of the religious right in the United States, and particularly as it developed over the past sixty years or so and merged with a conservative cultural and political movement that emphasized patriarchy, militarism, and without saying so explicitly, whiteness. The title reflects that merging, with Jesus standing in for the religious aspect and John Wayne for the white, patriarchal, militaristic culture that got attached to it. The other book is on Radical Lutheranism, which I'm going to guess most of you have never heard of. So, let me assure you that Radical Lutheranism is not some extreme or militant form of political Lutheranism. Radical is used in the literal sense of a return to the roots of the Lutheran movement and the central theological insights that gave birth to it. The term was coined by the late Lutheran theologian and seminary professor, Gerhard Forde. The title of the book is *The Preached God*, which reflects Forde's conviction, learned from Martin Luther, that God in Jesus Christ is particularly active in the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, which is the "churchy" way of saying "our communication of the promises of God's love, forgiveness, and presence with us in Jesus Christ," in other words, what we gather for here each week. But contrary to what you might expect from the title, this communication of God's promises is not something that is limited to this hour on Sunday mornings, or to the work of the clergy alone. It is what all the baptized people of God are called to attend to in our daily lives.

Today's Gospel reading has connections to both of these books that I'm reading, and implications for each of the very different approaches to the Christian faith that they cover. To get at those implications, I want to draw our attention to three things in this reading.

The first thing is something that I only just noticed in studying this passage this time around. I am clearly a life-long learner, as they say, because it sometimes takes me a very long time to catch onto things. I can't tell you how many times I've heard or read this story, and it has only just sunk in this time around that the disciples here were preparing Jesus' way. They were acting as an advance contingent for his visitation. Every time I've read or heard this passage in the past, I have thought of it as a kind of test run preparing the disciples for being the church after Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension. In my mind I think I subtly changed the tense of the final clause of the first verse there, where Jesus sends them two by two "to every town and place where he himself intended to go." I changed it to "every place where he *had* intended to go." In other words, I was thinking that Jesus, now on his way to Jerusalem and on a tight schedule, didn't have time to make it to all the places he *wanted* to visit, so he sent his disciples instead, and that was the extent of his connection to those places. That's not what the text says! It says that Jesus sent them ahead to all of the places he *intended* to go – not *had* intended, *still* intended. He was still going to all of those places. He was just sending the disciples ahead to get things ready for him. This was happening already in last week's Gospel reading, in the previous chapter of Luke, when those he had sent ahead came back to report that one of the towns would not receive him.

Why does this matter, this slight change of tense? It matters because I think that one of my other assumptions was right. This *was* a kind of test run for the early church. This *is* a template for how the church is meant to function. But getting the tense right here means understanding that the church is not a substitute for Jesus in his absence, the best we can do

while we are waiting for him to come back. It is instead a preparation *for* and a means *of* his presence, right here and now. Jesus is already here when we gather in his name, when we announce and live out his reign, which has already begun to come, which is exactly how we prepare for the fullness of his presence that is yet to come.

I'll return to this idea in a minute when I get to my number three. But before that is the second thing I want us to see in this text. And that is how Jesus wanted the disciples to make connections to these towns and places he was sending them to. They were to be vulnerable and dependent on their hosts, to make real and meaningful connections with them. Think about the dynamic between you and another person when you have everything you need, when you are fully independent. You might make small talk, exchange pleasantries, if you have the time. You might even make some kind of connection and have a delightful conversation, like Helen and I did with a couple we sat next to in a restaurant on our recent vacation. But the relationship is fleeting, momentary. Now think of how that changes when you need someone's help and they help you, or when someone needs *your* help and you are able to give it to them. Something deeper and more meaningful happens, doesn't it? I think that is the intent here. Jesus means for us not just to broadcast a message to those who will listen. He means for us to establish relationships. Relationships happen when there is mutual dependence, when there is genuine care and concern for one another. And messages are heard differently when they come from those with whom we have a relationship.

The third thing to notice in this text is Jesus' assertion that "whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me." This one is tricky. It's tricky because sometime people reject us not because we are speaking for Jesus, but because we are jerks – because we haven't established or maintained those genuine relationships that Jesus wants us to make with each other, because we bring with us our personal baggage that Jesus asks us to leave behind, our own selfish agendas that conflict with his. But when we are, by the grace of God, doing it right, when we approach each other in humility and genuine concern, when our words are not mere words but are embodied in a way of life shaped by our trust in Jesus' promises, then we can be confident that we have given them Jesus, that the promises we make in Jesus' name are as good and effective as if he was standing here in the flesh, as he did with his original disciples, and making those promises face to face.

This is Gerhard Forde's point in the series of essays that make up *The Preached God*. God is meant to be preached both as one who judges and as one who saves, but always in such a way that God's judgment pushes us to hear and receive God's promises of love and reconciliation in Jesus' death and resurrection, and the promise of genuine life that that makes possible, a life shared with God and with one another, a life that endures even the assaults of sin death and evil. The church is meant not to establish God's kingdom. That is God's work, not ours. The disciples were not sent to take over the local governments of the towns and villages. They were sent to announce that that God's kingdom is near, and to be agents of healing and hope. And that is what we are sent to do as well. May God then grant us grace faithfully to live out this commission of our Lord in the life of the church. May we preach Christ crucified and risen for the life of the world. May we also trust the promises we bear. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.