4th Sunday after Pentecost – July 6, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

We are finally settling down into the long post-Pentecost season of the church year, going back again through Jesus' earthly life and ministry that we covered in the festival half of the church year. This time the focus is on the church, and the goal is to help us understand our part in continuing and extending Jesus' work in our time and place. And as you are well aware, our time and place have their particular challenges. One of those challenges, which I grew up believing wasn't and couldn't be a problem because we are diverse democracy that keeps church and state separate (and because I have a history of being surprisingly naïve), are the ongoing attempts to use religion – our religion, Christianity – in the service of political and cultural agendas that are, ironically, diametrically opposed to what God is actually up to in Jesus Christ. And one of the important ways we can face those challenges is by keeping the irony front and center and continuing to explore in detail how true faith in Jesus leads us in a different direction, away from selfishness, isolation, greed, and the lust for power. All of these ways of attempting to coopt Christianity are nothing new, and their impulses were present even in Jesus' own disciples. But God has always been calling and drawing us into something better. Let's see how three things in today's Gospel reading can help with that.

The first thing is something that I only noticed recently in studying this passage, namely that the disciples here were preparing Jesus' way. They were an advance contingent for his visits. When I have 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 in my mind 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. But 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 the Gospel reading we would have had last Sunday if we hadn't celebrated Peter and Paul. In that text, 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 it gives greater significance to the disciples' task, both in this text and later after Jesus' ascension. I wasn't completely wrong in my previous assumption. 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 both a preparation for his coming, as well as 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. Reminding ourselves of that 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. 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 sometimes 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, by the grace of God, we are 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 and making those promises face to face.

What do we do, though, with those towns that would not receive the disciples? The ones the disciples were told to stand in the middle of the street and make a scene in, to wipe the dust of the town off of their sandals as a witness against them? It's easy to let those slip by without comment. Are these the towns that will finally get fire from heaven called down on them, as James and John had wanted to happen just a few verses before our reading today – you know, like in the good old days of Sodom and Gomorrah? We might be tempted to think so, but let's try harder. How does the God we know in Jesus deal with those who reject him? You might want to ask Peter. And let's remember Jesus' response to James and John who wanted to massacre a whole village. He rebuked them. But ultimately, Jesus dies for those who reject him. And in this Gospel of Luke's, he forgives them, even as they are killing him.

So yes, rebuke is sometimes necessary. Shaking off the dust of your feet in protest sometimes needs to be done. 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. Those promises lead to the kind of life God intends for us, a life shared with God and with one another, a life that resist the temptation to align ourselves with the powers of sin, death, and evil. And let's be clear: The church is not meant 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 the 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.