

Harvest Workers

Luke 10:1-20

One of the most enduring stories of the American Revolution is the story of Paul Revere's ride. This ride was made famous by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem; Listen, my children, and you shall hear Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere, On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-Five: Hardly a man is now alive Who remembers that famous day and year.

As the British were massing to find the revolutionaries and confiscate their weapons, there was uncertainty over which way they would go. The revolutionaries decided to have Paul Revere wait across the bay, and look for a light in the Old North Church, where a sexton friendly to the revolutionary cause would put up lanterns to show how the British were coming; one if by land, two if by sea. Paul Revere sets out on his horse, warning those along his way that the British are coming. The revolutionaries gathered at Lexington and Concord and fought the British, beginning the American Revolutionary War.

Now, of course, the story from the poem doesn't quite tell the whole story. Paul Revere wasn't the only rider; William Dawes rode along with Paul Revere, and Samuel Prescott joined them later. Others went out and brought the warning to others as they went along. Among the lessons we can learn from realizing that more people than just Paul Revere made that ride are this; there are some jobs you can't do on your own.

That seems to be the case as well as we hear today's Gospel lesson, of Jesus sending out seventy-two disciples, saying "The kingdom is coming!" Their message comes not as a warning, but as an announcement of joy, an announcement of freedom, an announcement of blessing.

But let's begin at the beginning. "After this," the text begins. After what? If we look back at the previous chapter of Luke's gospel, we see that Jesus had announced his coming rejection by the religious leaders and his death and resurrection, and had "set his face to go to Jerusalem." As Pastor Mark reminded us last week, Jesus had set his path in a stubborn way to head to Jerusalem, to head to the cross, and nothing was going to move him from that path. That is the context of the work the seventy-two disciples are called to do. They are to go ahead of Jesus to the towns he will come to on his way to what will certainly look like the failure of his cause, announcing that "the kingdom of God has come near to you." That suggests that this "kingdom of God" is not a typical kingdom.

The idea of kingdoms is strange for us anyway, especially close to the Fourth of July. Kings and kingdoms seem like archaic concepts to us today. Even in those nations that still have kings or queens; they're pretty much symbolic figures. Queen Elizabeth II, who just celebrated her Platinum Jubilee, is a good example of that. But we can't avoid language about the kingdom of God (or the kingdom of heaven, which means the same thing) in the gospels. And every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask that God's kingdom would come. What does that mean?

Now, it's important to remember that when Jesus uses the kingdom of God, he's not describing some sort of theocratic monarchy. He's not describing a physical kingdom. It's not a kingdom of this world. But it's a kingdom in this world. The kingdom of God is where God's rule is active. That's why, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray not only for God's kingdom to come, but for God's will to be done

on earth as it is in heaven. Where God's will is done is where God is recognized as being in control. Where God's will is done, that's where God's kingdom is.

And God's kingdom doesn't come the way other kingdoms or nations come into being. God's kingdom doesn't come into being through war or rebellion or conquest or exploration. God's kingdom doesn't come through politics or games of thrones. It comes through God's power alone.

The disciples are not just to announce that the kingdom of God will show up at some time in the future. Instead, they are to say that it "has come near to you." With that, they are echoing the words that Jesus himself used when he began his ministry. It sounds as if the announcement itself brings the kingdom near. God's word does what it says it does.

When the seventy two returned, they were giddy with surprise that Jesus' promises proved trustworthy. Jesus' decisive response to this enthusiasm was to redirect their attention from their worldly success to the heavenly cause of the mission. Yet despite this rebuke, Jesus is happy for them, encouraged by them.

The harvest is plentiful. This confidence seems misplaced at a time when the Church's survival is in question. We hear headlines about how fewer people believe in God, and fewer people are going to church. So why the confidence?

Jesus said the harvest was plentiful even as his group of followers numbered in the double digits. As Jesus' command to pray to the Lord of the Harvest indicates, conversion is God's work and not the result of human "reason and strength". We pray because God alone converts hearts to desire to follow Christ.

When we pray to the Lord to send out laborers into his harvest, what, exactly, do we pray about? We pray to the Lord Jesus, because it is

his harvest that we are thinking of. We pray for unbelievers, that they might hear the Word of God, know Jesus' love, and receive his forgiveness. And we pray for the mission of Christ's church, that people would recognize the need for the Gospel to be proclaimed and answer his call for workers in the harvest. We also pray that the Lord would give us eyes to recognize the need and consider joining in this work.

That is the strange irony of Jesus' prayer. He tells his disciples, the church—us—to pray for more workers to enter into the harvest. But then he calls his disciples to answer that very prayer. "Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest," says Jesus, "to send out laborers into his harvest." And then he immediately calls his apostles and sends them into the harvest field. The church prays this prayer, and the church answers this prayer. We pray the prayer and we answer it.

When we share our faith with others in conversation or pray for the spread of the Gospel, we are actually scattering seeds that God uses to grow faith in people's hearts. And then at the right time, when they are ready and the harvest is plentiful, God can use us, or others, to reap the harvest. We don't convert people—God does that. He takes care of the growing and maturing of faith.

The harvest Jesus talked about was the coming of the Kingdom of God, the gathering of many people into the barn of Christ's church. It was a big job, an overwhelming task. Starting with a group of 12, or 72, seems like a small place to start. But from those simple beginnings came the billions of Christians around the world today, including you and me.

We, too, don't know when seeds of faith will be ready to be harvested. We don't know if faith will be knee high by the 4th of July, or how to measure it. We do know that God is in control

of the growth. The harvest is plentiful. And so
is God's love.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ames, IA
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