

A Vision and a Mission
from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Reading: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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The text from Luke reminds us that the laborers are few but the harvest is great. Workers are being sent out, nevertheless, even though the labor pool is small. Admittedly, this will be difficult work.

Jesus is also heard admonishing his first disciples to be prepared for less than gracious welcomes in the villages to which they will be sent. He tells them that if a town turns its back on you, go somewhere else, where they welcome you and want to hear what you have to say (i.e. the Good News). Receive gratefully whatever hospitality you are offered.

And then this last note, almost a competitive-sounding word from Jesus: Make sure you get the last good word before being driven from a town if that should happen. Say, “We wipe the dust of this town from our feet. But know this, ‘The Kingdom of God has come near.’” One can almost hear the Monty Python writers rejoicing gleefully and eager to add:

“Your mother was a hamster and your father smells of elderberries.”

When it came time for the seventy to report in they were heard to say, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us.” To which Jesus replies, “Yes, the power of Satan is a bluff, for Satan is a bully. I have seen Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning...Nothing will hurt you. My power is with you.”

However, he cautions, don’t crow about winning this contest. If you want something to crow about, make it that your names are written in heaven. In other words, let the truth that you are doing what God has called you to do be what fills you with satisfaction.

The vision Jesus shares with the seventy is a vision calling for readiness to act when the time is ripe. He also calls for them to show resiliency, the ability to respond to setbacks and to seize opportunities. And he calls for them to demonstrate a spirit that, in a word, can be described as humble but strong.

(In the Sermon on the Mount we hear this reflected as Jesus declares, “Blessed are the meek,” which is literally translated as “the obedient.”)

So, again, Jesus commends his followers and admonishes them to keep the vision of the Kingdom of God before them, refusing to let resistance, excuses, and inhospitality keep them from completing the mission. And what is the mission? Laying

out and bringing to fulfillment the Kingdom of God on earth. That is, the way of God for human beings as opposed to the way of Satan. Jesus knows his enemy and he knows our vulnerability. It is going to be a never-ending contest in which the power of God will, nevertheless, prevail.

“And do not lose sight of the subtle ways Satan works,” he could have added. This is the attractiveness of the easy way, the way that is safe, the way that assumes we all deserve comfort and security. Satan is clever and can persuade us that his way is more fetching than God’s way, requiring far less discipline.

II

As I wrote these words this first week in July, images of our Founding Fathers, meeting in Philadelphia in 1776, kept coming to mind. I thought of long, hot, dusty days in the city’s center down by the river in which those early framers of liberty had to pursue their vision of a free America. There they labored in their woolen outfits through June and into early July. Work groups within the Continental Congress had been given their assignments, planning civil government by the people and for the people once the new Declaration of Independence was made public.

Certainly Mr. Jefferson’s writing task was to become the most celebrated of all: composing the document that would become hallowed by us all. But other tasks, concentrating on

military organization for the anticipated war, financial arrangements for a new nation, diplomatic ties with potential allies, etc. were equally essential if the break with England were to be truly a move toward liberty for all Americans.

It was a constant struggle to keep *the vision of independence* paramount in their minds. The objective was to realize the mission for America: *a nation of free people*. Our leaders could not allow the threats of defeat and reduction to indentured servant-hood dissuade them from declaring their conviction that we were already on our way to that servant-hood under the crown's rule. Nothing less than absolute freedom was acceptable if the vision was to be realized. And if they could keep that vision before themselves and before the people they knew the mission would be fulfilled.

The vision was clearer later than it was amid the sweat and dust of early July 1776. The vision was an evolving thing, a process of discerning what was needed and what was possible for freedom to prevail. One doesn't strike quickly a mold from which the image of a new nation will emerge so clearly that all will see its virtue. Such enterprises take time, patience, compromise and much perseverance. (Something like a congregation during a time of leadership transition, discerning God's mission for that people of God in the future.) Such tasks take time and commitment from hundreds of people as the case for future leadership to take us toward our vision is made.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *John Adams*, author David McCullough describes the dogged perseverance and long hours tallied that summer of 1776 by the Founders as Mr. Jefferson's document was edited, particularly by Franklin and Adams. It was a process of negotiation and compromise as just the right language was selected for the document. This was no time for pride of authorship on Jefferson's part. This was a time to keep the vision and the mission clearly in mind.

III

There are still other admonitions in today's text that could have inspired and motivated our Founding Fathers. From the directives to take only the essentials on the journey to admonitions regarding response to lack of hospitality along the way ("Don't be surprised if many listeners fail to share the vision or declare themselves ready to throw in with your mission. If that happens, move on to a place where you *can* get a hearing. Do not let others discourage you from declaring what you feel you are called to announce: the coming of the Kingdom of God.")

An image from the theatre comes to mind with a stage and actors performing before a skeptical audience. The drama has been written and cast and is now in the hands of the actors. Their task is to communicate the drama's truth to a less-than-converted audience who only occasionally attend the theatre.

This doesn't mean that the audience cannot be persuaded but it does mean that the acting had better be convincing and from the heart and soul if they are to communicate beyond the footlights.

It was Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard who suggested that our lives in the church are such a drama, but with a few key changes. In Kierkegaard's plan the congregation are the actors on the stage, the clergy and theologians are the stage directors and God is the audience. Here, our acting must be so strong, so filled with conviction, so inspired that even God will be inclined to applaud our performance.

Also, there is this: Our performance as disciples/actors with a vision to communicate is not dependent upon early critical reviews or theatres filled with thousands of people. We are not dependent on immediate approval from the culture. Our performance, our obedient fulfillment of the mission is driven by our conviction that this is the truth of God for the world: *namely, that God loved the world so much that he gave his Son as a sacrifice so that all might be free from the power of sin. He assures our salvation.*

This is news worth sharing, proclaiming from life's stage for all who will hear to believe and to live by.

Thanks be to God.