

Faces of Discipleship: The Traveler

*A communion homily preached on Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on July 7, 2019*

I.

Several years ago, I experienced the gift of serving on a panel discussion with other ministers from a variety of backgrounds to dream together about “God’s new day” or the kingdom of God, and how we see it breaking forth all around us. The room was filled with folks in good spirits, such that when one of the panelists started on a tear about what we thoughtful and kind church minister-folk do, we all had to laugh. “You know what we do?,” he said, his voice lilting and rising with the cadence of one who had started to **preach** in that fellowship hall. “We say ‘the kingdom of God has come near,’ and then we ask people to hand out the bulletins before worship. We say ‘the kingdom of God has come near,’ and then we ask people to serve meatloaf on a Wednesday night. We say ‘the kingdom of God has come near,’ and then we ask people to help keep the lights on and the floor swept.”

Ironically enough, I was in the midst of asking the 13 who would later serve on our Special Committee on Facilities and Mission, and I thought the time was just right to approach Meredith Smith, who had been there at the event, with these words: “The kingdom of God has come near,” I said to her, “will you serve on the Special Committee on Facilities and Mission?”

II.

Following Jesus in the way of Love is so ordinary, it’s extraordinary, is it not? And not just in the church, but in the world, in the sacred ordinary

moments of being a disciple that fill our days. Feeding the hungry. Sitting with the hurting. Listening to the grieving. Visiting those who are bound. Breaking bread around the table. Sharing in life together. Bearing witness to new life in the deadest of places. Practicing resurrection. *For the kingdom of God has come near!*

This paradox of the ordinary extraordinary life of discipleship is one we enter into during what's called the Ordinary Season, or the Season after Pentecost — these weeks where instead of moving toward something big — the manger, the cross, the tomb, the tongues of fire — we're simply entering into the ordered time, the daily journey of life on the road with our Lord.¹

It's here where we look to those first disciples for clues about how to actually *live* as a follower of Jesus, how to be ones proclaiming the dawn of *God's* new day even in the ordinary rhythms of *our* days. For up until this point in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has served as the primary actor, the one who is mobilized and moving to preach, teach, and heal those he meets. But now, Jesus' ministry expands and his reach extends — first to the twelve then to the seventy, Luke explains, "and [he] sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go."

I find myself wondering about these early followers of Jesus, seeing in my mind's eye the faces of these seventy we read about today. Surely they were perfectly happy to be followers of his — tagging along as he traveled through Galilee, watching closely as he fed the multitudes and healed the sick, listening for a word about grace and mercy that came rolling over the plain, beginning to model their lives on his. But now, Jesus is asking for

¹ For a beautiful word on Ordinary Time, see Debie Thomas' essay of the same name here: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/theeighthday/290-ordinary-time>.

something different. No longer will they just follow, now they will go. Now, the face of followership becomes the face of discipleship. Now they are being sent.

III.

So what is it that we can learn about being a disciple of Jesus from these who he sent? How do these faces — the seventy, traveling in pairs with nothing but good news to share — illumine for us the ordinary extraordinary rhythms of discipleship for us?

First, **these disciples embody the life of Jesus.** Did you notice how similar Jesus' instructions are to the very way he lived his life? Like echoes of his life, these disciples go into every town to all the people — there's no exclusivity for good news, you see! — and the first message they bear is that of peace. Together with those they meet, they are to cure the sick and be with the hurting. They are to live together, eat and drink together, abide with one another with presence and intentionality. They are to embody the best of Jesus' presence in meeting people where *the people* are, not just where *the disciples* are. And no matter if they are welcomed or shunned, in both word and deed, these traveling disciples are to proclaim good news: *the kingdom of God has come near.*

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us how important it was for the disciples to say what they did and do what they said. "Preaching the kingdom without doing anything about it is just politics," she says, "and good works without good news is no more than a temporary reprieve, but to proclaim the kingdom while acting it out — that is powerful and that is what Jesus sent

his friends out to do.”² Because is that not what Jesus did? *For the kingdom of God has come near!*

Second, **these disciples practice inescapable vulnerability by extending and receiving hospitality.**³ “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals,” Jesus says, or in *The Message* translation: “travel light. Comb and toothbrush and no extra luggage.” Now I don’t know about your travel habits, but this isn’t exactly an easy one for some of us. I just came back from about 48 hours away with my family to visit friends, and our car was loaded down with stuff! But this story demands that we ask ourselves: what might it be like to trust God through the kindness of one another for all you’d need? What might it be like to serve and be served in a mutual cycle of abundance where there really is enough? What might it be like to go like peace-proclaiming lambs into a world of wolves with that measure of trust? What we find is that in doing so, in living simply with only the good news to share, disciples of Christ become like those they serve.

It’s like the old Buddhist tradition, where all seekers of the truth must spend at least a year of their lives as beggars. From village to village they travel, wearing nothing but that instantly-recognizable saffron-colored robe, owning nothing but a begging bowl. And in each place, they must rely on the compassion of strangers to meet their most basic needs. After that year, they’re welcome to go back to their lives as usual. But there’s nothing usual

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “Heaven at Hand,” *Bread of Angels*, p153.

³ Thanks to David Lose for the great phrase “inescapable vulnerability” from “Luke 10:1-11, 16-20,” *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, p217.

about the lives to which they return. For you see, none of them return the same.⁴ *For the kingdom of God has come near!*

Finally, **these disciples go willingly where Jesus sends them.** For at the core, disciples are the ones who say yes. From Moses to Jonah, scripture gives us stories of those who initially were reticent to say yes to God, hemming and hawing and dragging their heels. But for these seventy, when Jesus called them out and gave them a job, they grabbed the map, dropped their nets, left behind their lives, and went. “The harvest is plentiful,” Jesus said, “but the laborers are few.” And more than two thousand years later, we sit here today because disciple after disciple all throughout the ages said yes to the work of Love, the work of the harvest. Theologian Alan Hirsch reminds us about how remarkable this movement of Jesus is, saying “... we might well wonder at the sheer risk that God took in handing over the fragile and precarious Jesus movement to this rather unlikely crew. But the fact that it did succeed is directly related to the truth that through their engagement with Jesus, this rather dubious group of humans had somehow become true disciples. Jesus had, through living with them and showing them God’s way, somehow succeeded in embedding his life and the gospel in them.”⁵

This reminds me of the story of the missionary society years ago who wrote to David Livingstone, a 19th century Scottish Presbyterian pioneer medical missionary in Central Africa, and asked, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to send others to join you." Livingstone wrote back, "If you have people who will come only when there is a good

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Heaven at Hand,” *Bread of Angels*, p154.

⁵ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements*, p110-111.

road, I don't want them. I want people who will come even if there is no road at all.”⁶

Embodying Jesus, practicing inescapable vulnerability, extending and receiving hospitality, going willingly where we are sent. Ordinary extraordinary living as travelers on a journey, disciples who love and live in the way of Jesus.

You might say this kind of living is as ordinary as passing out bulletins or sharing a meal or serving on a committee. But it might just be as extraordinary as a dubious group of humans (us!) given good news and an open road with the God-sized risk that changes the world. *For the kingdom of God has come near! Amen!*

⁶ Story shared by dear friend Dr. Greg Dover