

“PEACE, PLAIN AND SIMPLE”

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 3, 2016

Text: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Once upon a time, like, fifty years ago, my dad and I were both looking for a way to make money, and we decided to go together to a seminar at a motel on the outskirts of Louisville to explore the possibility of getting rich selling encyclopedias.

Not just any encyclopedias, mind you. The mighty Encyclopedia Britannica. (Then as now, owned by the University of Chicago.) (Sidebar: Woodlawn Tap, a bar near the U of C, also referred to as “Jimmy’s,” used to keep a set of Britannica over the bar to settle arguments among its customers.)

I could hardly imagine a higher calling, at that point in my life. Not being a Christian at the time, an encyclopedia salesman was probably the closest approximation in my mind to being an evangelist.

I always loved new books anyway, but what a thrill to handle brand new volumes of the mighty Britannica, even a sample copy of the leather-bound edition. Wow. And the sky would be the limit to my income, because I was sure I would be able to talk people into purchasing their own private library from me.

I had an existential crisis, however, when the pitchman explained how we could sell these sets of books to practically anyone, no matter what their income. He said that Britannica had hired University of Chicago psychologists to work out the wrinkles in their sales plan. The fundamental idea was to build a box around the customer, with no way out. Whatever objection they raised in order to escape from the sale, you would have an answer which would close that door. By the time you were finished, all you would have to do would be fill out the paper work.

Now, most of you know I have been an overseas missionary, so you are probably wondering why it would bother me to persuade people to buy the best encyclopedia in the world. Don’t missionaries do the same thing, basically? Is there much difference between selling people an idea, a worldview, a gospel—and selling them a tool for turning their children into valedictorians?

Yes, there is. And that is what Jesus is talking about in today’s gospel reading.

Even though the gospel of the kingdom of God is as precious as can be, its advocates have no license to force it down anyone’s throat. Even though it can do a world of good for people in a world of trouble, Jesus does not authorize his apostles and evangelists to force people to drink it.

When he sent out his seventy of his disciples to prepare the way for his visits by curing the sick and announcing the kingdom, he forbade them to take even so much as one carry-on. No purse, no bag, no sandals. “And greet no one on the road.” (That’s odd. I think it means don’t dilly-dally, not don’t be polite.)

And when you get to the place where you are going to share the good news, offer peace. If people respond favorably, settle in and do your work. But if they don’t want you around, don’t make a fuss about it. And don’t be obnoxious or abusive. You may employ a little irony, for example, you can make like you don’t want to put them out by removing any dust from their town, so you can leave that behind. But let the last words you say to them be nothing contemptuous or angry. Only say “The kingdom of God has come near.” That’s it. Can you remember that? “The kingdom of God has come near.

(My ancestors' country was evangelized by a king who apparently did not read this part of Luke. He was unfamiliar with the true message and character of Jesus, so he used the University of Chicago method to make Christians out of Norwegians. He boxed them in, quite simply, by offering them two alternatives: become Christian or die.)

Yes, Jesus wants us to share the good news that we are reconciled to God and to one another not by meeting any standard but by God's own acceptance of us. But no, Jesus does not want us to box people into accepting the gospel through any sort of proofs. What we offer is peace. What Jesus offers is peace. Peacefulness therefore must characterize the way we offer the message, the way we celebrate it, the fellowship in which we recall the message, and so on. Peace, peace, peace.

"Unless the Lord builds the house," Psalm 127 says, "those who build it labor in vain."

Unless the church grows by the strength of the message of the kingdom; unless the sharing of peace is the condition in which it is established; we labor in vain. There is no place for manipulation, exploitation, trickery, pretense, bullying, or negotiation. The disciples were not authorized to "dumb down" the good news to make it acceptable to a village.

In our Second Reading the apostle Paul shows that he had imbibed the lesson Jesus taught the seventy. Apparently some people in the early church were throwing their weight around, once again putting burdens on people instead of taking burdens off people, which is the point of the gospel. He warns against hypocrisy, which is the inevitable result of people judging others. He says that he himself has never tried to bludgeon people into either accepting or remaining with the gospel. Instead, he boasts of nothing but what God has done in Christ. "May I never boast of anything except the cross of Christ." His last word on the subject is "Peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God."

It can be frustrating, and it can make us upset or angry when people don't get what we are trying to communicate, even when what we are trying to share is peace. But hold on, be patient, Jesus says. "Let us not grow weary," Paul says.

Let me reiterate today what I was saying last Sunday: The upshot of our message, the bottom line in the communication of Christians with those who do not believe as we do or live as we do, the gist, the drift, the essence, the kernel, what matters, the substance and shape of what we have to offer anyone in the name of Christ, is peace, freedom, and joy through Christ our Lord.

Because of that, as Jesus and Paul make clear in our readings, it is not all about us and it is not up to us either to "get results at any cost" or to claim credit for what we do in Jesus' name. People who do not belong to Christ are not the enemy. They are not the snakes and scorpions upon which Christians are to tread; no, they are the ones on whose behalf you and I are authorized to tread upon the evil of this world, for the sake of the world's peace.

About 49 years ago, I read Thomas Merton's *Seven Story Mountain*. I remember thrilling to his account of coming to faith, and how he then began trying to overwhelm other people with arguments for faith—and how he soon repented of this. Faith in Christ is not the sort of thing you settle by asking Jimmy to hand you volume 3 of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and reading out Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God—or by denouncing those who don't get it. It is the peace of God, the kingdom of God, announced by the servants of God, accompanied by our taking away the suffering of others.

The peace of Christ. Plain and Simple.

Amen.