

July 7, 2019 - Pentecost 4C

“Guided by Luke: Sent Into a Pack of Wolves” - © Rev. Seth D Jones

Luke 10:1-20

Israel in Jesus' time was a thriving, frothing arena of competing ideas and religious practices. Since Israel was under Roman rule, and was also a pass-through point for much trade from the East through to Europe and points West and East alike, ideas from around the world would fight it out among the people for primacy. This period, and especially the period up to and following the fall of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70AD is called the Hellenistic Period of Judaism.

One of the most influential ideas in Rome, the Empire, and therefore in Israel at the time, was the movement of Stoicism. The great philosophers Seneca, Epictus, and Cicero were all advocates of the Stoic approach to life. Stoicism was so influential because it promoted a very high ethical standard, demanded a rigorous attention to self-development, and required continuous study, practice, and discipline in application in the world. If this sounds familiar, it should. There are many books and articles that compare Stoicism and Christianity. Both Stoicism and Christianity are more appropriately thought of as 'ways of life' rather than cohesive, structured philosophies, even though neither resist and both even promote the creation of cohesive, structured philosophies.

There is a direct similarity in how the Stoics would tell others about themselves and how Jesus asks the disciples to tell others about what they are up to. Disciples of Stoic teachers were known throughout the empire because they went out by twos into villages with virtually nothing to carry with them in order to rely on the hospitality of strangers. If we are going to understand our story today, we need to understand that Jesus is intentionally modelling discipleship and evangelism on the most popular ethical movement in the Roman Empire.

Think of it this way:

You live in a village in Israel . You have visited Jerusalem a few times for pilgrimages and festivals, so you have been exposed to the roiling, competing ideas that would be discussed in the public squares of the city. It is likely that some of those discussions are happening in your town, too. At the same time, you were going to the synagogue regularly and so you are steeped in the tradition of your ancestors. You know the Torah. Sometimes, when your Rabbi would speak, you would hear some ideas from other places creeping into his talk. Most likely these ideas were from Plato, or Aristotle, or from Stoic philosophers. They are good ideas. Once in a great while, a couple people would wander into your village with virtually nothing and would start speaking in the village square.

Compared to your Jewish upbringing, there would be at once an alien quality to what they were saying, and at the same time, a familiarity within the ethics, the call to rigorous attention to the development of self for the sake of a legacy to your ancestors, and even the cosmology of a world created out of fire and a world consumed by fire at the end of its life cycle -a Great Conflagration, they called it. Sometimes, your Rabbi may have even said similar things.

But one day, a couple people wander in, in exactly the same way as these Stoics from afar. They have nothing, but seem to be from nearby, and they start speaking of peace and the kingdom of God having drawn near and the advent of the Good News of God. Sometimes, this team would even heal people and call out demons in people.

What would you think of this? Would it flip all your expectations?

*“I thought I would be listening to Stoics, because they look like Stoics, but now I am listening to fishermen, accountants, and low lifes telling me about a complete revision of my religion.”*

This is what Jesus is up to here. He is using the good things from Stoicism for the sake of the Kingdom of God. In the same way followers of Stoicism took on a teacher who gave his disciples outrageous tasks from which the disciple would learn a tremendous amount about their reactions and emotional state, which the disciple would then seek to bring under control, so also Jesus sends out the disciples, but with a very different goal and outcome.

Both Stoics and Jesus-followers are interested in hospitality, but for different reasons. Stoics were interested in hospitality because it provided a platform for the betterment of self with a side benefit of teaching others about their philosophy. Jesus-followers were interested in hospitality because hospitality is a gateway for the experience of knowing the Kingdom of God has drawn near. The benefit to both guest and host alike in the Jesus way is that love becomes more present in the world. Jesus subverts the self-orientation of the Stoics by making this sending out all about the core truth of the Kingdom of God, that this whole project is all about love. It is about a lot of things, like faith and hope, but as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, *“the greatest of these is love”*.

As many of you may know by now, sometimes presenting yourself with a message and presence of peace and love is not always comforting to other people. Sometimes, they do not react well to it. This is why Jesus tells the disciples, *‘I’m sending you out as lambs into the wolves.’* The people become wolf-like upon hearing the message and will chase you down and tear you apart. I could be describing many of our political discussions today.

No side is immune from deliberately mishearing, misreading, misrepresenting, and eviscerating the other side. Who 'started it' is no longer relevant. It is like being a lamb in the midst of a pack of wolves out there.

And this is why going into the village and bringing the Good News requires Jesus to give a quick review on how to be received as guests by hosts. When people welcome the peace you bring to their household, be an agent of peace in their household. Stay long enough so that your hosts can fulfill their desire to be hospitable, but not so long that you overstay your welcome and become a burden to your hosts. Bless their families and houses when you leave and tell them they have inhabited the Kingdom of God in a way that reflects that future we will all someday share with one another.

Jesus also reviews what the response should be to the lack of hospitality. Don't sit around and try to convince people of your perspective if you have not been invited to share your perspective. Don't make arguments when all that is desired is that you leave. Instead, shake the dust off your shoes and move on to the next place. Most of all, leave the judgment the wolves have against you up to God. Jesus tells the disciples, God judges harshly the lack of hospitality. "Remember Sodom", he says. Sodom and Gomorrah have exactly nothing to do with how people express their love for one another, but instead Sodom is the premier example of how God perceives the lack of hospitality shown by God's people. God will handle the wolves.

Hospitality matters. Hospitality is one of the very large lenses through which we can read all of Scripture. How we welcome others and how we accept the hospitality of others will be a major part of the so-called 'life review' when we cross over to the other side. Hospitality in our daily life is always a reflection of the ways of the Kingdom of God. As the author of Hebrews says, reflecting the story of Abraham welcoming angels in Genesis 18, *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*

While hospitality in Scripture is primarily an individual and community action, it has political implications. Our support of inhospitable actions at the level of our governments and institutional structures is also a reflection of our personal inhospitality. If you are hearing in what I am saying a direct condemnation and critique of how those who profess to be Christians are handling our current refugee and immigration crisis, especially by separating children from parents as a 'deterrent', then you are hearing me correctly. How many mothers, fathers, children are angels in cages along our southern border right now?

But let's come back to what we have some power and control over - our own ability to be agents of hospitality, both in welcoming and being welcomed.

I am not going to send you out of here two by two today to practice proclaiming the Kingdom of God having drawn near in Jesus Christ's presence. But I would ask you to reflect on what it means for you, as a follower of Christ, to provide a welcoming way for all who come into your sphere of influence.

Does your hospitality look Christ-like? Reverse it. Does your welcoming of being welcomed also look Christ-like?

Maybe hospitality in the way of Jesus looks like inviting your young, single neighbor over for dinner with your family, even if he or she just got out of jail.

Maybe being like Jesus' disciples looks like buying coffee for the young woman who is trying to find her way as a lesbian in this strange new world.

Maybe hospitality looks like inviting the Muslim family who has been in town for a couple years with, what seems to you, no visitors or friends for coffee and conversation.

Maybe being like Jesus' disciples looks like not caring what your news sources are telling you about other people and instead, turning off the internet, the podcast, the television, and going out to be with people who believe different things than you do, who dress differently than you do, who listen to different music than you do.

Maybe it means accepting an invitation to lunch from that one person who did that one thing to you a long time ago that you still haven't forgotten about.

Here is the big difference between the Stoics, who were primarily concerned with the perfecting of the individual self by way of ethics and behavior and philosophy, and the followers of Jesus who went into villages in the same way, but are concerned about the Kingdom of God, hospitality, and proclaiming Jesus:

Let's let the disciples speak for themselves. *The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'* (10:17). When the proclamation of the Kingdom of God through the intentional work of hospitality is present, evil dissipates, people are healed from broken relationships, communities come together in fellowship and hope and joy. Satan, the demonic, the forces of evil, do not like it at all.

Jesus says an amazing thing in response to the disciples' joy. He says, *"I kept watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you"* (10:18-19) That is a lot of power and authority the disciples are carrying around with them.

And that authority and power most expresses itself when those who follow Christ are welcoming others and work to make themselves welcomed.

Jesus adds one more thing to his celebration with the disciples and his acknowledgment of their power. He says, *“Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (10:20)*. The important thing, Jesus says, is not that we can cast out demons and that doing so casts evil out of Heaven itself, but that we remember who has the ultimate power. The One who has ultimate power is the One who is also the Great Host of the heavenly banquet, the One who welcomes and sits us at the great table in the Kingdom of God, God in God’s self.

Wherever we are doing the work of these disciples who have gone out two by two, wherever we are seeking the hospitality of others and also being hospitable ourselves, when we come together at the table, then heaven and earth are meeting, joining together, in the great communion between God and human being, between the divine and the living. The Book of Revelation reflects the outcome of the disciples going out two by two:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,  
‘See, the home\* of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell\* with them;  
they will be his peoples,\*  
and God himself will be with them;\*  
<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away’ (Rev 21:1-4).*

And it is with that hope, my friends, that profound sense of future and present hospitality, that we go out into the community as lambs sent out into packs of wolves.

May the Lord welcome you, and may you be a welcoming presence for the Lord and all God’s messengers this day and all your days. Go out and do so in the name of Jesus.

Amen.