

Sermon: C Proper 9 2019
St. Augustine's-in-the Woods
7 July 2019
The Rev. Susan S. Gaumer

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
Galatians 6:1-16
Isaiah 66:10-14
Psalm 66:1-8

Today's Gospel from Luke is about Jesus sending 70 disciples out to spread his teachings about the Kingdom of God to whomever would listen, sent

them out as lambs into the midst of hungry wolves!

"Don't take much with you" Jesus cautioned, "and don't stick around if you meet with hostility. Get the job done and come back happy!"

Of all things, they did--which must mean those wolves were truly hungry for Jesus' message about love and forgiveness.

How many of us believed we were signing on as Christian missionaries when we were baptized or confirmed? How many of us have ever claimed our identity as followers of Jesus who are expected to spread the Good News to others whom we don't know or trust? Some, perhaps, but not many.

We're terrified of missional evangelism--that's what Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses do, not ordinary Episcopalians like us!

And yet, it was the missional spirit of our forebears that got us here--those who told us about the love of Jesus and showed us how much the Holy Spirit can accomplish with a little human effort, inspired us to become better than we are, taught us to love and to forgive and to hope for a promising future. All that is mission.

When I was a teenager I thought I wanted to be a missionary to Native Americans--one of those adolescent follies my parents thought--wisely! I didn't know the first thing about indian belief or culture, but I hoped every kid like me would have a chance to know about Jesus. I still feel that way, but I am older and wiser now, and have a deeper appreciation for the challenges of mission work and for the various ways it has been pursued among Native Americans in South Dakota.

While visiting church friends in Rapid City, SD, during the 1980's, we spent a day on Pine Ridge reservation. Fr. David wanted me to meet Sister Margaret Hawk, a member of the Church Army--the Episcopal equivalent of the Salvation Army--and the first woman seated as a deputy to General Convention in 1970. It was an honor for me to meet her--and there she was, babysitting her grandchildren in a tiny red brick house at base of a large mesa while the rest of the family attended a pow wow further south in the only real town on the reservation. As the kids played in the dirt outside the house she greeted us at the door and invited us in. Inside it was dark and sparsely furnished. She apologized that she could not offer us any water because the water had gone bad so they had to haul it by truck every day from a good well miles away. She told us she spent nearly every day down at the Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters trying to get the water problem addressed--a bonafide ministry for sure!

We then went up onto the mesa, Red Shirt Table, to the small wooden mission church with an outhouse nearby. The window over the altar faced east and there were prayer books and Bibles translated into Lakota in all the pews. Fr. Bob Two Bulls rode circuit to that little mission and five others like it on Pine Ridge. Sister Margaret led Morning Prayer when he could not be there. Obviously raising up indigenous ministry was a goal of the Episcopal missionaries who first served on Pine Ridge. It still is.

Entering the town where the pow wow was taking place we encountered the large and beautiful Roman Catholic mission church, decorated with Dakota motifs and served by clergy who were not of Native American descent. I intend no judgment here, but the contrast was dramatic and typified the two common approaches to mission evangelism throughout Christian history--the one foreign, impressive and imposing; the other more humble with greater attention to honoring native culture and to raising up local leadership--two different styles, each, hopefully, offering a message of God's love to people hungry for a more promising future.

Meeting people where they really are, where their hopes and dreams yearn for something more in life--community, healing, spiritual depth, mystery, for God--that is what mission is really about and it is both the privilege and responsibility of every baptized person, not just clergy.

We don't have to journey to Africa or to Pine Ridge or any other place to offer it--the grocery store or athletic club or art class will do just fine.

The Episcopal Church calls self-supporting congregations "parishes", while those that are not financially viable are called "missions." What a mistake this is, because we are all really missions with the mission to bring others into the faith we cherish and share.

Whenever we Episcopalians become obsessed with budgets and filling the pews we lose touch with the very thing that brings us together and that we have to offer--a living faith in Jesus Christ that can only grow if it is shared with others. The church is not called to be successful, but to be faithful--a challenging counter-cultural message today, as always.

Use this interim time for refreshment, for getting back in touch with whatever drew you to Jesus and into the church in the first place. Be the warm community of faith you already are and invite others to join in.

They are just people like us, hungry for a message of love not fear, for community, not isolation. Invite them; that's your evangelical mission.

Use this time wisely, but don't be too intense about the search for a new rector. Do the work together you need to do, but remember the Holy Spirit has a big part in all this. It's not all up to you--as Jesus knew when he sent out those 70 souls and it turned out just fine.

We can do this, too, don't you think?

