

July 3, 2022
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Pentecost 4
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Buddy System”

“The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”

Camp Beisler is the outdoor ministry site of the New Jersey Synod that has been enjoyed by generations of young people. Located in the hills of Hunterdon County, it has offered young people a respite from the heat of the inner city, brought together youth from churches across my home state, and given both youth and adults a place for recreation while also offering regular chapel services and Bible studies. Its ministry continues today as the Cross Roads Retreat Center, a joint ministry of the Lutheran and Episcopal churches. It remains a special place in the lives and memories of many people who spent time in this beautiful place.

I spent time at Camp Beisler both as a youth and an adult. I joined with many of my friends from St. Peter’s as a camper, sharing cabins and activities for several summer weeks. We swam in the lake, played games in the fields, went “rock hopping” in a local stream, gathered for worship in the outdoor chapel, spent a night sleeping under the stars in our “home in the woods,” and sang songs before and after meals in the dining hall. Years later, I returned to Camp Beisler as a chaplain, sharing a week with campers and counsellors as I relived my childhood memories of being a camper. While Camp Beisler did not make me an outdoorsman, it did leave me with many fond memories of weeks on those bucolic grounds that thankfully are still being enjoyed as a site of recreation and ministry.

One of my most vivid memories of my years at Camp Beisler as both a youth and adult is the “Buddy System” at the waterfront. On the first day of camp, all campers are instructed in the importance of water safety by the lifeguards and are then invited to find a buddy for whom they will be responsible whenever they are in or near the water. When they enter the swimming area, each person puts their nametag on the “buddy board” so that the lifeguards have a record of who is in the water. At frequent intervals throughout every swimming session, the lifeguards would blow a whistle and call out “buddy check,” at which point buddies would hold their hands up in the air together to show that they are with their buddy. If one buddy was missing, all action stopped, and a thorough search ensued. Watching out for and being responsible for one’s buddy ensured that everyone was safe and cared for in those

waters that could be both enjoyable and dangerous.

There are many occasions in which it is important to have a “buddy,” someone to watch out for us and ensure our safety. When a person is ascending a ladder, it is helpful to have a buddy to support the ladder and watch out for the person’s safety while that person is high up above. When someone is lifting weights, it is good to have a “spotter” to make certain that the weight is not too heavy and becomes dangerous. When we have a heavy object to lift or to carry, we need another person to bear the burden with us. The buddy system ensures our health and safety while fulfilling the declaration of the Lord at creation that *“it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”* (Genesis 2:18).

As Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, he is still preaching the Kingdom of God, but now the Kingdom is being proclaimed not only by Jesus and the Twelve. In a scene that is unique in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus commissions a larger group of disciples which foreshadows the mission of the early church and establishes a pattern for those who are sent out: *“After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.”* (Luke 10:1). The call of the Seventy (some manuscripts report the number as Seventy-Two) recalls Moses’ appointment of seventy elders to help him (*“So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD; and he gathered seventy elders of the people and placed them all around the tent.”* – Numbers 11:24), as well as the number of nations in Genesis 10. The commissioning also foreshadows the mission of the church to the nations after Jesus’ resurrection (*“... and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”* – 24:47). *“The extension of Jesus’ mission is not placed in the hands of a chosen few. Instead, Luke envisions the mission of the kingdom carried out by many of Jesus’ followers.”* (Jeannine K. Brown). The pattern of sending disciples out in pairs is rooted in Mosaic Law, where two witnesses were required for a testimony to be credible (*“A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence which may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.”* – Deuteronomy 19:15). Luke notes that the Seventy are sent out *“ahead of him”*; their work is to prepare the way for Jesus in each of the villages to which he intends to visit.

As the disciples are sent out in pairs, so is the commissioning discourse that follows structured in paired saying, beginning with the statement that *“the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”* (10:2). The prophets of the Old Testament used the harvest as a metaphor for eschatological judgment and for the gathering of Israel in the last times

(*“Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full.”* – Joel 3:13). The metaphor implies both that many will respond to the kingdom’s announcement and that there is a pressing need for disciples who will proclaim the good news of the Kingdom. Harvest season is a time of great urgency when many labourers are needed; this sense of urgency is clarified in Jesus’ command that his disciples *“carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.”* (10:4), echoing Elisha’s instruction to his servant that *“if you meet someone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer”* (2 Kings 4:29). Jesus also warns the Seventy of the dangers that will face them as they set out on this mission: *“See, I am sending you out like lambs in the midst of wolves.”* (10:3). The wolf was the natural predator of the lamb; the metaphor warns the disciples of the opposition they will encounter; this foreshadows Jesus’ warning to his disciples that *“you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name.”* (21:16-17).

- “By means of this metaphor, Jesus seems to be counselling innocence and sincerity, vulnerability and non-resistance as a means of turning aside anger and danger.” – Alan Culpepper.

The instruction on how the disciples should receive hospitality is also in pairs: the proclamation *“peace be with you”* and the instruction to remain in the house where they are received. The character of the host is determined by whether the host receives the disciples and their message of the Kingdom: *“And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.”* (10:6). The fact that *“the labourer deserves to be paid”* was universally understood, so the disciple should receive the hospitality, drink, and food provided by the host. Implicit in this command is the removal of all social barriers, as when Peter and Paul were received in Gentile homes in Acts:

- “Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’” – Acts 10:13-15.

Jesus gives three specific instructions regarding the conduct of the mission in each village: 1) eat what is provided; 2) heal the sick; and 3) announce the Kingdom of God. The disciples are charged to continue the three central actions of Jesus’ work in Galilee.

Jesus also instructs the disciples how they are to respond when they encounter rejection: *“But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you’”* (10:10-11). The act of shaking off dust from one’s feet is a traditional act of repudiation, a reference to the Jewish practice of removing the dust of foreign soil when returning to Israel (*“So [Paul and Barnabas] shook the dust off their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium”* – Acts 13:51). The rejection of the disciples’ message does nothing to threaten the truth: *“Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.”* (10:11). The Seventy go forth in the assurance that *“God’s reign is arriving in this world through Jesus’ ministry and in his death, resurrection, and exaltation. In this way, ‘the kingdom of God has come near.’”* (Brown).

After a section in which Jesus pronounces woes against unrepentant cities, our lectionary continues with Jesus’ announcement that *“whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”* (10:16). Jesus confers on the Seventy the rights and authorities of a legal agent who comes with the authority of the sender. Hearing here means acceptance and obedience; it is related to the Word of God (*“Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and obey it!”* – 11:28) and those who hear the Word and obey it glorify God. Hearing also requires understanding and doing (*“My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”* – 8:21).

- “O my Lord God, what a great comfort a poor, contrite, and broken conscience may receive from such a preacher, when it believes that such words and comfort really are God’s Word and comfort, and that God means it so. Therefore we most certainly believe that God works through his Word, which is like an instrument through which the heart may truly learn to know him.” – Martin Luther.

Luke does not tell us how long the Seventy engaged in their mission, but the Evangelist reports that *“the seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’”* (10:17). Joy characterizes the experience of the disciple who has obeyed Jesus’ mission charge. The joy of these disciples on mission also foreshadows the joy they would experience at Jesus’ resurrection (*“And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”* – 24:52-53). The success of the Seventy is epitomized in their power over demons, a sign of the power the disciples would experience after the resurrection (*“Now many signs and wonders were done among the people*

through the apostles.” – Acts 5:12). Jesus responds to the report of the Seventy with an oracle that sets their work in the context of the expectations that the end times would be marked by a conflict between God and Satan in which Satan would be defeated:

- “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!” – Isaiah 14:12.
- “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of the world will be driven out.” – John 12:31.
- “And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, and ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.” – Revelation 12:7-9.

For Satan to be cast out of heaven means that Satan has been defeated, his power broken. The sign of Satan’s defeat is the disciples’ obedience and success. The work of the disciples signals the coming of God’s sovereign reign on earth. *“The kingdom work they have been engaged in – healing, exorcisms, and preaching – has been engaging cosmic powers, and God’s purposes are overcoming these evil forces. Truly, God’s reign is taking hold.”* (Brown).

Jesus uses images employed in prophetic and apocalyptic writing when he proclaims that *“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.”* (10:19). Serpents and scorpions appear as images for the power of evil in Scripture (*“... the LORD your God, who brought you out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions.”* – Deuteronomy 8:14-15). Vanquishing the enemies of God’s people was another of the apocalyptic hopes that the disciples of Jesus were sent forth to proclaim (*“Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”* – 1:72-75). Jesus’ sayings point to a higher reason for rejoicing – not just that Satan’s power has been broken, but because the disciples’ names are now written in the book of life (*“Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the*

book of life.” – Philippians 4:3). The proper response to the coming of God’s Kingdom is joy, not only for the defeat of evil and the vanquishing of the demonic powers but also for the experience of life rightly ordered in God’s fellowship.

- “By this we should learn that God does not want people to be sad and that he hates sad thoughts and sayings and doctrines that oppress us. God makes our hearts joyful. For he did not send his Son to make us sad but to make us glad. That is why the prophets and apostles and the Lord Christ himself admonish us and even command us at all times to be joyful and of good cheer ... Where there is this joy of the Spirit, there is dear joy in the heart through faith in Christ, and we know of a certainty that he is our Saviour and high priest, and this joy is seen in the things we say and do.” – Luther.

While Jesus sends the Seventy forth according to the “Buddy System,” the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ was never meant to be a solitary pursuit. Jesus’ first act after his temptation is to gather disciples who will follow him throughout his ministry and then be commissioned to *“be witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8). The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost occurs when *“they were all together in one place”* (Acts 2:1), and throughout the Acts of the Apostles the work of the early church occurred in teams of two; this included the partnerships of Peter and John, Paul and Barnabas, and Paul and Silas. Paul often refers to his ministry partners in his letters (*“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.”* – 2 Corinthians 1:11). The ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ continues to be a partnership, *“an assembly of all believers in which the Gospel is purely preached, and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.”* (Augsburg Confession). As buddies at Camp Beisler were responsible for the safety of one another, watching over each other at the waterfront, we are called into a “buddy system” in which we care for each other, support each other, pray for each other, and work together so that we might experience the joy of the Seventy as we *“rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”*

- “Jesus is looking for help, for he cannot do the work alone. Who will come forward to help him and work with him? Only God knows, and he must give them to his Son. No man dare presume to come forward and offer himself on his own initiative, not even the disciples themselves. Their duty is to pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers at the right moment, for the time is ripe.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Our Lord is calling us as his Church, the assembly of his holy people, to work together as partners in ministry, in a “buddy system” in which we support one another as we fulfill our Lord’s call to “*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9). May these ties that bind our hearts in Christian love be a continue source of strength and hope as we share our joys and sorrows, pray for one another, support one another, build each other up so that we might be able to share the love of God and experience the joy that is ours in this fellowship, this “buddy system,” that is the Church of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.