

JULY 7, 2019  
4 PENTECOST (PROPER 9)  
TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
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A couple of weeks ago, as we began our journey through Ordinary Time, I said that a distinct characteristic of Ordinary Time is that we are journeying with Jesus and his early followers through their experiences *before* the events of Easter and Pentecost and Ascension. So we do well to try to suspend some of what we know happens later in order to be able to enter our gospel stories – this year from the Gospel of Luke – and engage them from the vantage point of the moment in the process that is being described in the story at hand. When we do this, the richness of each story opens up more fully.

So here we are today early on in a long section of Luke's gospel – almost ten chapters - that contains few parallels in the other gospels. All three synoptic gospels, including Luke, have the story of Jesus sending out the twelve disciples on their first mission. But only Luke tells today's story: a second mission, this time of seventy followers, "sent ... in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go" (Luke 10:1). This group of seventy does not include the twelve disciples – it is a fresh, larger group. The instructions Jesus gives them are very strict: they are to travel light, "greet no one on the road" (10:4), eat and drink whatever is provided for them, minister in the towns that welcome them, and wipe the dust off their feet in the towns that reject them. The general sense of the instructions is that at this point in Jesus' ministry, still very early but now expanding to include this larger group of emissaries, the concern is strictly to spread the word and minister in Jesus' name. God's provision for them is all they need, and is to be entirely trusted. It is not yet a time for making friends or building communities, at least not as a primary focus: it is a time for sharing the power of God as it is becoming known by those who have been following Jesus.

And the results are sensational. "The seventy returned with joy," we are told, "saying 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'" (10:17). And Jesus tells them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning" (10:18). It's an incredible moment, in which we readers of the gospel are witnessing the very first days of the Jesus movement. There is a sense of the tremendous power and appeal of Jesus, even when that power and appeal are communicated not directly by Jesus, but through his followers. Evil can be thwarted. The world can be moved in a new direction. And Jesus celebrates and affirms what the seventy have done, as if to say "see, you can do this without me!"

As we sit with this story, this moment, as described by Luke (and remember, it is a moment only described in Luke's gospel), let's remind ourselves of what Luke was up to. Luke's gospel is unique in that it has a Part Two – the Acts of the Apostles. Luke and Acts are one work, meant to be read together. Luke is really the only gospel writer who is telling the story of Jesus in the context of telling the story of how the church came into being. The story we are exploring today is a first taste of where the Jesus movement is going. By the end of the Book of Acts, on the Day of Pentecost, the same power described in today's story will empower all the nations of

the world to understand one another's languages. This is the power of the Holy Spirit, which will graft the Gentile world onto the trunk of Israel. It is the power that will save the world.

Back in today's story, it is safe to say that only Jesus has a clear view of this. In instructing the seventy so strictly, he is wanting to ensure that they don't get ahead of themselves. All that's important is the message about Jesus, and the healing that can take place in his name. And again, the seventy can do it without Jesus' physical presence.

So what if we try to put ourselves right into this framework, and imagine what it means for us today. We are a small group of followers of Jesus who have become excited about who he is and what seems to be possible through him. He has asked us to go out and spread the word. He has told us to travel light, not to worry if we are not well-received, to stay and minister when we are welcomed, and to leave the outcome to God.

I don't know about you, but I think that there is remarkable pertinence for us Ossining Episcopalians in the story of this moment in Jesus' ministry. We are small. We are anxious about where things are going, and can't yet picture an outcome clearly.

We are so like the seventy. In fact, when we come together to worship that number is a pretty close approximation of our size. Jesus didn't say to the seventy before he sent them, "Don't worry, I'm going to die, rise again, send the Holy Spirit, and launch a new world religion" – all he said was "go and minister in my name." It was good enough for the seventy. Might it be exactly what Jesus is saying to us today?

There is an amazing article in the current issue of *The Christian Century* by Samuel Wells, Vicar of St. Martin In-The-Fields in London. Fr. Wells was invited to preach at a huge convention of charismatic Christians in the European countryside, which included a three and one half hour worship service attended by 1300 people. People were invited to come forward for healing prayer, and one person who prayed with Fr. Wells and his healing partner, after pouring out her heart, finally said: "I think – I feel – we must pray ... for a miracle" (*Why did I go to a charismatic worship service in an arena?*, *The Christian Century*, July 5, 2019). And listen to Fr. Wells' reflection: "This moment summed up the church of our day: surrounded by grief and yet somehow still here, circumscribed by pastoral appropriateness and the management of expectations, fearful of intimacy and genuine touch, yet with a faint recollection that this all started with a miracle, and a distant hope that maybe those days are not completely gone" (*Ibid.*). "Yes," Fr. Wells responded to the woman, "we must" pray for a miracle. "And we did" (*Ibid.*).

"All this started with a miracle." Indeed. Or perhaps even more accurately, it all started with many small miracles before anyone was sure where it was all going. That's how it was for the seventy. Do you suppose that's how it can be for us, too? May God grant us this grace.