

Seventy is a good sized group. It may be that there are just about seventy of us here. (or three times the twenty gathered on Saturday.)

It may be that the seventy we hear about in today's gospel lesson are those who remained after hearing Jesus' lay out the challenge of being his followers. And like for Jesus, they may find there is nowhere to lay their head at the end of a long day. They may need to leave the burial of their closest family members to others, and they must look ever forward to the task and not turn back for other things—which while important—are not the things of the kingdom. This is what we heard in last week's gospel reading. Signing on as a follower of Jesus is not always going to be easy, it's not always going to fit our schedules and it *will* require our entire attention.

And now, those who remain are gathered for instructions from Jesus for their mission. It's hot. It's dry and dusty. You can imagine them shifting from foot to foot and stealing glances at one another as they wait to hear their assignment.

Jesus tells them that the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. And the first thing they should do is ask God for more laborers. Pray for more folks just like them. And then Jesus tells them to go. "Go on your way." Get about it. Don't hang about here, now's the time and here's the task.

This mission carries with it a sense of urgency. The time is here, the time is now. Don't look back, don't stop for personal tasks, go on your way.

And then he tells them that he is sending them like lambs into the midst of wolves. Chances are there were a few shepherds in the group and those that weren't shepherds knew enough about that business to know this is not good news.

But having told them they are going like lambs among wolves, does he give them the tools they need to fight back and stay safe? No, he goes on to tell them all the things they shouldn't take. No purse, no bag, no sandals even. They are going to have to be absolutely reliant on those they encounter and entirely vulnerable to the "wolves" in their midst.

But here's what I love about this story. Given all the struggle and the urgency and challenges they undoubtedly faced, these mission-directed folk come back absolutely joyful. I can hear them as they tell Jesus, still amazed and unbelieving, "It worked—it actually worked!" "Get this! In your name even the demons submit to us!"

I can imagine that even as they went out—as instructed—they still were not entirely sure God was on their side. They didn't quite believe God would actually listen when they called on his name.

But Jesus tells them, "not only did God listen... not only did the demons submit to them, but Satan himself fell from heaven like a flash of lightning--in other words, hard and fast."

The demons submitted, yes, but much more than that happened. As the seventy went out told of God's kingdom, the powers of evil are overwhelmed and God's reign triumphs.

And then finally, even as the seventy are doing their happy dance at all they have accomplished. Jesus puts it into perspective for them. "It's not these things you have done

that are important. It's what God has already done for you.." "Rejoice instead that your names are written in heaven." Jesus helps them with a little priority setting lifting up what is truly important.

At the beginning of this reading we read that Jesus sent out 70. But there's a footnote. Maybe it's 70, maybe it's 72. The manuscript witnesses we have for this are equally divided. Most scholars agree, though, that the number is symbolic. And there is an interesting note for the reference to 70. In Genesis 10, there are 70 nations mentioned. In fact, these 70 nations represent the known world. So Jesus' sending of the seventy could be understood to be representative of everyone. He's sending all of us. And while we don't want to remove this story from its context, and the patterns and practices of the day, it's fair to hear in it a call for each of us, and information to guide that call that relates to that information given and experiences shared by the disciples so long ago.

Are we each called? We absolutely are.

Because the harvest is still abundant beyond our imaginig and my friends, laborers are few.

So like the disciples, we should pray first. Pray daily for more laborers. And then we should go as we are being sent. But hear in Jesus' words, we're not sent to generate the harvest. We're not sent to sow the fields or care for the crop. That work is already done. It's not our harvest. It's God's harvest. We are just the workers acting as we have been sent to bring in the harvest.

To me, this relates to some conversation we heard last Saturday as those present at the presentation on the building program talked about the visibility of this church. It's easy to forget for those of us who come here regularly and have become so familiar with

the place that we forget what it was like when we first saw it. But many of our new members are telling us that this is not an easy church to find or see. From the street it doesn't look like a church. Maybe it's a building related to the school. I remember once, several years ago, a new member referring to RLC as the best little secret in Ankeny.

But the harvest is abundant and workers are few, and we should not be hiding. Over the last several years we have had steady growth as folks manage, one way or another, to find us. And this has been a place where lives have been changed, where the good news has truly been good for many. Where hope has been found, new life begun and promises realized. This is a place, I just learned, where the entire congregation served as baptismal sponsors for a couple of our youngsters. We take the gospel seriously here and we need to let that be known to as many as we can.

The harvest is abundant. God is doing his part. So let's do our part and share our gospel witness, nurturing all people through Jesus Christ and the word.

We also learn from Jesus' instructions to his disciples that the mission we are called to is not going to be easy. We may often find ourselves like lambs among the wolves.

It can be hard to be faithful when we struggle with serious and frightening challenges. Challenges that seem to be so much more than we can handle. Challenges that seem to have sent so many others rushing toward rationalism or secularism or consumerism or any of a number of other isms that are so much easier to swallow than this Jesus business.

It can be hard to be faithful, living out the call to love one another when those folks around us can sometimes be pretty hard to love. When we have days where it seems

like everyone is against us—when the brokenness of the world breaks into our lives in uncomfortable ways.

It can be hard to be faithful when we struggle to see ourselves as a child of God, when we wonder how we can be someone that anyone can love, least of all God.

Wolves come in many different forms, and those of us who would claim to follow Jesus—those of us who seek to go where we are sent—we can sometimes find ourselves in the midst of a snarling pack.

Then we can also find ourselves like the disciples, filled with joy and stunned when we find that God has actually used us to accomplish God's work. "I prayed and God listened!" "I asked and God responded! God was with me. God actually, really seems to be in charge." We hear these promises of God, in scripture, in worship, in bible studies. And often we repeat these promises. But how often is there a part of us that's like a ten-year-old with her fingers crossed behind her back—saying it, but not sure we actually believe it.

But from what we hear in Jesus' response, what we can trust is that God not only listens, God not only responds, God not only acts, but in fact, God is doing far more than we can ever imagine. In ways apparent and in ways that are hidden, God's kingdom continues to triumph over the powers of evil and God's reign is ever before us.

And here's the best part. As Jesus tells the disciples on their return. It's not about what you do, it's not about how many demons submitted to you. It's not about your success rate in the good versus evil time trials. It's always and everywhere about what God has already done for you. Friends, your name is written in heaven. You are citizens

in God's kingdom, you are allies with God with a promised place alongside God for eternity.

On this day when we celebrate and recognize the blessings that we have as citizens of this country, we do well to remember that we are citizens of an even more blessed kingdom and followers of a king who created us and all that surrounds us. We are followers of a king who loves every last one of us and who will not ever let us go. We are followers of a king who equips us for the mission to which we are sent and who walks beside us on that journey—all the days of our lives and forevermore.

Thanks be to God.