

Kingdom Instructions

How many of you can remember—when you were a kid—going to the picture show on Saturday afternoon? Now, you may be too young to ever have done that. But back in the day, the feature film was usually a western. And at the end of the movie, just at the most exciting part, the same words would always flash across the screen. You know what those words were. *To be continued*. To find out what happened next, you'd have to come back the following week.

And that's just how it is sometimes with the biblical narrative. Often a passage we read is a continuation of the previous one. That's how it is this Sunday. Our gospel reading picks up right where last week's reading left off.

Last week, in Luke's Gospel, we heard that Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem. We began to understand that his time is growing short. We began to understand that there's urgency involved in spreading the message of God's coming kingdom.

This week we learn that Jesus, still on that same road to Jerusalem and all that awaits him there, is sending messengers

out ahead of him. He's sending his followers into the towns and villages that Jesus himself will be passing through.

But before they leave, Jesus sits them down and tells them what they are to do on this journey. Luke, in this chapter, doesn't depict them actually *doing* the work of ministry and mission. Luke's focus today is on what Jesus *instructs* these seventy followers to do. What Jesus instructs *you and me* to do. We need to be listening today, because when Jesus speaks to the seventy, he's speaking to us, too.

He's not talking to the original twelve disciples here. They're not part of this group of seventy. These are seventy *other* people. Now if you're wondering about the significance of the number seventy, that's how many nations are mentioned in the Bible's list. These seventy represent all the nations of the world. Luke wants to be sure we get it: These seventy people represent *all* the followers of Jesus—all of *us* followers of Jesus! Laity and clergy. Every one of us whom Christ has commissioned to serve and to do what he asks of us.

So it's good, today, to give careful attention to what Jesus asks the seventy—and us—to do. And we also take notice of what he *doesn't* ask the seventy—and us—to do. It's surprising.

And it suggests that we may need to look with a new perspective at what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Because Jesus doesn't say *invite like-minded people to come to your house of worship, and get them to join and become members*. Jesus doesn't say *be sure and report back to me how many new members you've signed up*. No. What Jesus says is *I'm sending you out. Go! Don't expect people to come to you. You go where they are. You go to them. Be on your way!*

And go in pairs. Jesus sends us out two by two. Do you remember when you were a youngster and you'd recently learned to swim? You were way excited because, at the pool, you were finally going to be allowed to go beyond the shallow water. But wait! You couldn't go by yourself. You were assigned a partner, another kid to swim with. Each of you was given the responsibility of looking out for the other. You had to have a buddy. The buddy system is particularly effective in a difficult or dangerous situation.

Jesus is well aware that service in God's kingdom isn't easy. So he doesn't intend for us to do it alone. He's sending us out into the deep end of the pool. He's commissioning us for

serious, challenging work; work that we do best when we approach it as a team. We're in this together!

So we go with a companion. But Jesus insists that we go with not much else. *Travel light*, he tells us. Too much *stuff* encumbers you. Weighs you down. On the road, don't let anything—or anyone—keep you from doing what he has called you to do. Don't let anything—or anyone—get in the way of proclaiming the coming kingdom.

For this is the very essence of what Jesus sends his disciples out to do: To keep announcing that the kingdom of God has drawn near.

Do it with hope in your heart. Do it with confident expectation. Even though you're not going to be welcomed all the time. Even though your message isn't always going to be received and accepted. It's not. And that's because the message of the good news of Jesus Christ is *profoundly* countercultural.

Christ sends us out to announce a kingdom whose radical nature goes against the grain of the value system of our market-driven society. Which attempts to instill in us from birth its values: That we are to accumulate as much power and as much wealth and as much *stuff* as possible. That we have enemies—

just as Jesus did—but that unlike him, we need weapons. That we are to be self-sufficient and self-reliant and not depend on anyone for anything.

But Christ sends us out with a diametrically different message. Christ sends us out with the message of a kingdom whose citizens live simply and peaceably. Christ sends us out with the message of a kingdom whose citizens refrain from retaliation. Christ sends us out with the message of a kingdom whose citizens know that the only real and lasting treasure is in the One who is the source of all power, the One on whom we're utterly dependent for life and breath and all we have, the One to whom all our allegiance is due. The One who is King of kings. The One who reigns over the kingdom we proclaim.

Your task and mine is to deliver the message. Our task is not to make anyone receive it or accept it. Christ sends us out unarmed. Powerless. Sends us out like lambs into a pack of wolves. Jesus knows there will be times when we—and his message—will be rejected. Just as he himself was rejected. People of his day don't always put out the welcome mat for him, do they?

But Jesus keeps on going. Then and now. He keeps on sending. He keeps on giving instructions for the work. In response to a suggestion for a ministry or mission, you might have heard someone say: *We already tried that, and it didn't work.*

But, my brothers and sisters, that's not a statement you'd hear Jesus make. Because Jesus never gives up. And he expects us who follow him not to give up, either. But to do what he instructs us to do and to leave the rest to God.

The kingdom of God comes near when you enter a house and bless it with the peace of Christ. The kingdom of God comes near when Christian hospitality is offered and accepted. The kingdom of God comes near when table fellowship is shared and strangers become friends. The kingdom of God comes near in acts of healing bodies and minds and spirits. The kingdom of God comes near in deeds of mercy and caring and kindness.

Today Christ sends you out to advance the coming of that kingdom. Today Christ sends you on a journey. But before you go, he prepares and readies you for your journey. He sustains you for your journey. He invites you to his table of grace. There,

he shares table fellowship with you. There, he fills you with the gift of himself—so that on your journey, he goes with you.

Centuries ago, Teresa of Avila recorded her thoughts on this journey and on what each of us is called to do along the way.

These are her words:

Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out to the world.

Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which he is to bless others now.

Beloved, you've been blessed by this Christ, this one in whom the story of a coming kingdom begins. Begins, first, with him alone. Then with twelve. Then with seventy. But the story's not yet over. It's one of those stories that is *to be continued*. The story continues with you. In you, through you, because of you, will the kingdom of God draw near?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.