

# Citizens of God's Kingdom

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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I've been thinking about hospitality and citizenship this past week. Monday was Canada Day, the day when Canadians celebrate Canada's birthday. Thursday was the 4th of July, the day when Americans celebrate their independence. I've been following the convention in Phoenix, knowing the youth would be sharing about their experience this morning. The convention theme was Citizens of God's Kingdom. And I've been pondering this passage in Luke, where Jesus sends out the 70 (or 72, depending which ancient manuscript you give weight to) with the message that the kingdom of God is near.

So I've been pondering citizenship and its implications for hospitality and what it means to be a citizen in this world and a citizen of God's kingdom. Theologically, Mennonites have said that we are in the world, but not of the world, and I think it is important to strive for that, to not let the ways of the world determine our values and the ways in which we live in this world. But practically, there is a lot about us that is also of this world. We all benefit from a pretty good standard of living in this country, and even have come to expect it. We own houses, cars, and other kinds of property and materials that don't necessarily differentiate us from others around us. We look and dress like 'the world'. So in many ways we are in the world and we are of the world.

In our Luke passage, Jesus commissions and sends out the 70 to go to all the places where he himself will go. They are going ahead of him, to introduce people to the work of healing and casting out demons that Jesus will do when he comes to those same places. There is a sense of urgency in what they are doing. In the verses ending chapter 9, Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem--he knows that this journey that he is now embarking on, will end with his death. His ministry on earth has a deadline, and it is important that he get others on board--not just 12, but 70. So he sends them out in pairs, with instructions about what they are to take with them--nothing--and what they are to say: whatever house they enter, they are to say, 'Peace to this house.' And for those who welcome them, they are to say, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." And for those who do not welcome them, they are to shake the dust off their feet and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."

There are many things that could be said about this passage when it comes to citizenship and hospitality, but here are just a few things.

The first is that the message about the kingdom is the same, whether the message and messengers are welcomed or not. There is no cursing of those who don't receive the message; the instructions are to just leave, shake the dust off their feet and go. One could

see this as a bit of an insult, but I think it is really giving us permission to keep moving when our message is not welcome. Shaking the dust off our feet is like wiping our feet at the door. We usually do that when we come into a house, so that we can leave the mud and dirt from outside behind us, so we don't carry it into the house. It is a deliberate action that leaves the past in the past; that leaves the outdoors at the doorstep. It differentiates between what was that place and what is this place.

I think sometimes we need permission to leave a place; to discontinue a ministry or a mission that is no longer serving its purpose or original intent. This requires a lot of discernment, and may take a long time, and it is really hard for churches to do. When lots of time, money and people have been invested in something, it is hard to walk away. But sometimes, we must.

This is an interesting passage for us as we live in this world and also claim our citizenship in God's kingdom. What does it mean to speak a word of peace into our community here in Goshen? What does, "Peace to this house" look like here? Where are the houses and places that need a word of peace? Where has God's kingdom come near to us? The issue of immigration at convention is one that is relevant for us here in Goshen. What is the word of peace that is needed here?

A second reflection on citizenship and hospitality has to do with what we carry with us. It is striking that Jesus tells the 70 (which was the same message he gave to the 12 when he commissioned them at the beginning of chapter 9) that they are to take nothing with them: no purse, no bag, no sandals. Did he mean this literally, or was he being metaphorical?

In its literal meaning, this was a journey of trust and of relying on the hospitality of those they met. This is citizenship that forces connection to others, not individual self-sufficiency. They were to arrive in new places, speak a word of peace, and stay in one house for the whole time they are in that place, and eat and drink what is set before them. They were at the mercy of their hosts, and any beliefs they had about what food was clean and what food was unclean were to take a back burner. What was important was receiving the hospitality that was extended to them. There's nothing worse than a guest who arrives uninvited, stays for weeks on end, and then doesn't eat the food you prepare! The word of peace is embodied in the hospitality that is graciously received.

It is difficult for us to be gracious recipients of the hospitality of someone else. We'd much sooner be the ones offering the hospitality; we like to be in control. But hospitality is a 2 way street. In order to extend hospitality, one also has to receive it. To receive the hospitality of someone else is also to be hospitable to them. One of the writers for the convention, Janet Trevino-Elizarraraz, was reflecting on being a first time attendee at MC USA convention. She writes about 2 experiences that prompted her to think about hospitality at a convention:

The first was sitting at a pre-event dinner table in which she felt invisible. She decided not to introduce herself, her usual way of engaging, but instead "sat there posed to belong." She recognized some of the faces at the table, but was dismayed when no one acknowledged her and the conversation continued among a group of people who obviously knew each other. She recognized that it isn't fair to put all the responsibility on the others to say hello, but it did get her thinking about hospitality at these kinds of events.

And her second experience:

In another line for dinner, as she was listening in to the conversation in front of her, one of the people turned to her and introduced herself enthusiastically, and then let her in line in front of her. When asked why she did this, she said she had lived in Phoenix before and felt such a sense of pride and took on the role of host to her Mennonite brothers and sisters.

She writes: "Within both of these experiences, I'm wondering... who are the 'hosts' of this event and consequentially who are the 'guests'? It's easy for all of us mostly being from long distances and not being in a Mennonite city to consider ourselves as guests here. The leadership of MCUSA organized it, and therefore they must be the convention hosts."

After outlining a variety of possible groups of people attending, from those who had been sent by their congregation or conference, to those who came even at the disapproval of their congregation, she concludes:

"It's statistically likely that if you're reading this and you're at Phoenix that you are a host even though you traveled from a faraway city like Goshen ... you are a host to a sizable group of us. But even if my Mennonite brothers and sisters are innocent to their role as hosts at their denominational event, I'm determined to make this event what I want it to be for me. I'll extend hospitality when I need it for myself. Whoever you are, I invite you to do the same. We are each other's hosts, and only in that way will we have the unity and love that we desire, and [hopefully the many who] have been or are marginalized [will] be brought into a shared experience this week."

I'm intrigued by Janet's playing with the concept of hosts and guests because I think it summarizes quite clearly the posture with which we are being commissioned and sent into the world with our word of peace. And it also points us to the kind of citizens we are in this world, and the ways in which we are ambassadors of the kingdom of God. We go as hosts--hosts of the gospel of peace, and hosts of the space we hope to create in unknown and unfamiliar places. But we also go as guests, treading respectfully and carefully on ground that is unfamiliar to us and unknown to us. We go as guests, relying on the hospitality of others. And we go as guests, because it is Christ who is the host of this message, this mission and this kingdom.

The passage ends with the following words: "Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." The 70 returned, amazed at the power they had to make demons submit to them. We, too, are sometimes amazed at the things we can do! We create great programs for welcoming people and nurturing children and youth, and encouraging people of all ages on their journey of faith. Jesus' words are an important reminder that it is not about us, and what we can do, but it is about what God is doing through us, in bringing peace to places where there is no peace. We are the tools of God's mission, citizens of this world and citizens and ambassadors of the kingdom of God. We are being sent ahead of Christ into those places where he intends to go. Our message of peace is embodied in the hospitality we receive and extend to those around us. May it be so.