

Tending the Mission of God in the World

Sermon by Sherm Kauffman

Luke 10:1-12

Some years ago, I had the privilege of participating in several consultations that our denomination was a part of that was led by Church Innovations, a church consulting organization based at Luther Seminary in St Paul, Minnesota. The leadership for Church Innovations was a group of PhD and professor types that were trying hard to engage conversation that made a difference in helping faith communities focus more intentionally on the mission of God in today's world. They developed a practice that they used every time the group gathered called, "Dwelling in the Word." It is similar to lectio divina but with a twist. It was an exercise in listening to the text, listening to the Spirit, and listening to each other, as the other listened in the same process. Now we Anabaptist like to think we spend time dwelling in the Word...but I'm not sure how much we really practice that any more.

The text that they chose to use for this new practice every time their dispersed team met was Luke 10:1-12. They had used this text, and practice, for over ten years as they now led four denominational groups in a similar process. Now imagine that every time they met they read the same text and spent a half hour or more listening to the same text and what the Spirit might be saying. PhD types and seminary professors, as they listened to the Word and then engaging to each other, intent on understanding what implications a particular text may have for guiding the church during a turbulent time of chaotic change in the culture and world offered a good example.

As I've engaged this text, the question kept returning as to what the spiritual underpinning was that led up to this story. How did Jesus, how do we, stay focused on the mission of God and not get distracted by the various issues that the culture and faith leaders of the day were/are debating? He didn't focus on issue statements but stayed focused on the real thing as described so brilliantly by Isaiah. Jesus' spiritual formation practices sustained him throughout.

This morning there is way too much to say in way too little time...but here goes. In Luke's gospel, Jesus, "setting his face toward Jerusalem" (9:51) is a pivotal point in his public ministry... It introduces a section where Jesus faces rejection by a Samaritan village, in 9:52ff, because of the political risks involved in hosting him... and, there's an attempt by the disciples to use "fire and fury" to begin this conquest to the center of power in the Jewish tradition...(this is after the 12 had experienced new powers, 9:1ff) but Luke reports that Jesus rebukes the disciples for wanting to use fire and fury to destroy the opposition...and goes on.

This story of rejection is followed by three brief stories of persons who consider following Jesus...but all of whom use various excuses or delay tactics... in effect rejecting the opportunity to become followers...

Luke then begins the next section, chapter 10:1ff with "After this the Lord appointed 70/72"...

It puzzled me as to why Luke would use the story of sending the 12 on a mission at the beginning of chapter 9, then turn right around at the beginning of chapter 10 with the story of appointing and sending the 70/72... and where did this story come from anyway...

There is other gospel record including the story of the 12 being sent... but only Luke has this story of the 70/72...

- So who are these no-named people?
- Why don't they have names?
- Why don't the other writers refer to them?
- Is this just a story of Luke's imagination or creation?
- Why don't we hear any other stories of this group?
- So, is there significance in the number? If so what might that be?
- And, as we read these stories are there key differences in the 12 and 70 story lines? Do those differences hold any clues to what this story has to tell?

So...what is the significance of the number 70/72???

Well, some suggest that it's simply a random larger number that is intended to include everyone...that Luke is trying to expand the missionary call so he throws in this bigger number to illustrate the larger or expanded mission arena, kind of like Jesus' use of 70x7.

Others suggest that this number comes from the early Jewish tradition when Moses commissioned 70 persons to assist him in managing the affairs of the people... (Exodus 24)... This number was then also picked up in the Jewish tradition by having 70 persons make up the Sanhedrin Council...the supreme court...if you will... of the Jewish faith community...

A third option is that this was the number used, at the time, as the "table of nations," or list of nations of the world...as referred to in Genesis 10... It is this third option, I've come to believe...seems most appropriately applied to this story... If Luke was thinking of the mission of God including the entire world... then using a number that symbolized the nations of the world would make logical sense... As we read the rest of Luke's writing it certainly is the way in which the story flows...from the more traditional Jewish expression of faith... through a transformational process to the broader world stage...from Jerusalem to Rome...from the center to the periphery.

We would be well served by dwelling in this text multiple times, over a long period of time for reflection, mining its depths and applying its wisdom.

It is my deeply held conviction that this story is the outline for how we should go about tending the mission of God in the world... AND if you look carefully at the Christ event it fits very closely with the pattern/method/model that Jesus followed in his coming to our house...vulnerably...at great risk...with a greeting of Peace to this House...becoming one with and hosted by humans

To follow in this way is a little scary because we must leave our position of power and security and take on a posture of vulnerability, humility and receptivity in order for God's peace to flow through us, bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, releasing the oppressed and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, God' jubilee.

This is a very different model than what has been practiced for many years in the classic missionary and church growth movements around the world that focus on 'telling' and warning of judgement.

Here is a brief condensation of the model:

1. Come to understand that you are called, anointed and empowered by God
2. Ask God for more helpers
3. Be aware of the risk and dangers present
4. Leave your baggage, your power behind, assume a posture of vulnerability
5. Go with another for support and accountability
6. Engage the world with a greeting of "Peace to this house" or place
7. Receive from and adapt to the culture (Eat what is set before you)
8. Allow God's healing and hope to attend the needs present
9. Tell them God's Kingdom has come near...God Loves You (THE LAST THING)

The number 9 has no significance and is not exhaustive...

Now, there has been some recent thinking in the business world leaning toward a leadership model that looks and sounds similar to what Luke outlines.

A well-known business consultant and author, Patrick Lencioni... has some provocative thoughts in his book "Getting Naked." It's about stripping away facades, and it's all about vulnerability, transparency, respect, honesty and integrity in the workplace.

I think he may have read Luke 10...but I'm not sure...

Listen as I read several sentences from Lencioni:

"At its core, naked service boils down to the ability of a service provider to be vulnerable - to embrace uncommon levels of humility, selflessness and transparency for the good of the client....As obvious as that may sound, it is more difficult than it first seems, because humility and selflessness and transparency often entail suffering. And suffering is not something most human beings, especially in our modern culture, understand or welcome."

Now...do you see what I mean...he must have read Luke 10...

This is a business consultant articulating a business principle???

Lencioni identifies 3 major fears that keep us from living into this way of doing business... or for us... doing the business of tending the mission of God in the world... they are:

1. ***Fear of losing the business...*** for us... it's fear of losing numbers or losing the congregation... this fear actually curtails our ability to keep focused on our core task of tending God's mission...as described by Isaiah..."
2. ***Fear of being embarrassed...***for us...it's fear of people seeing that we don't have it all together and that we don't always live as we preach... Lencioni says that "*Naked service providers are so concerned about helping a client that they are willing to ask questions and make suggestions even if those questions and suggestions could turn out to be laughably wrong...they readily admit what they don't know and are quick to point out – even celebrate—their errors because protecting their intellectual ego is not important to them*"
3. ***Fear of feeling inferior...***this has its roots in protecting our ego, believing that we have the answers, and it's about preserving our sense of importance and standing relative to the other...Lencioni says that... "We may have the temptation to suggest by words or by actions that we are better than someone else."

Tending the mission of God in the world is all about caring, ***really caring***, about the other...ready to lay down our lives for the neighbor...the broken...the marginalized...the poor...the stranger...the oppressed...the disadvantaged...the captive...the fellow traveler on the journey...this is more than just running a program, as noble as a program may be. It's more about the other than about us... It's all about God's mission...God's Peace...God's Shalom being made present...and palpable, and extended to all we meet as we tend God's mission...While proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor...

I DON'T KNOW...WHAT DO YOU THINK?