

Proper 9 Year C—Luke 10:1-11

Today's Gospel records the commissioning of 70 (or 72, depending on which translation) disciples as missionaries. The commissioning of the Twelve has already been recorded, but the commissioning of this larger group of followers is not recorded elsewhere in the Gospel records. It gives a sense of growth and movement. As Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, he is still preaching the kingdom of God, but now the kingdom is being preached not just by Jesus and the Twelve, but perhaps by all his followers. In a sense, this commissioning foreshadows the mission of the early church and establishes a pattern for those sent out.

What is the significance of the number 70 or 72? Is it merely a round number for a large group? The significance of the number can probably be traced to the list of nations in Genesis 10, where the Hebrew text lists 70 nations and the Septuagint lists 72. Or perhaps the commissioning recalls Moses' appointment of 70 elders to help him.

Commentators agree that the instruction not to greet anyone on the road underscores the need for urgency and singleness of purpose. Similar is the instruction to carry no purse, no bag, and no sandals. Travelling light is a way to focus on the mission. When I was young, I did quite a bit of travelling. One thing I learned was that I could tell how experienced another traveler was by the amount of baggage they carried. I found that those who have travelled the most carried the least. They were not missionaries but travelling light freed them to see what they came to see and do what they came to do.

The missionary must not be in the work for what he can get out of it. He has three instructions: 1) Eat what is provided 2) heal the sick and 3) announce the kingdom. The disciples, therefore, were charged to continue the three facets of Jesus' work in Galilee. He is to eat what is put before him and must not move from house to house hoping to find better and more comfortable quarters or seek to prolong his stay. It was not long before the church had its spongers. There is a work called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. It was written about A.D. 100, and is the church's first book of order. In those days there were prophets who wandered from town to town. It is laid down that if a prophet wishes to stay in a place for more than three days without working he is a false prophet. It is interesting to me that three days is also the maximum stay for

the traditional wandering monk in India. Also if a prophet asks for money or a meal he is a false prophet. The laborer is worthy of his hire, but the servant of a crucified Master cannot be a seeker for luxury.

When I step back and look at what Jesus was demanding of his disciples, he seems like a strict taskmaster. That is especially so for me if I consider well-known saying of Jesus which we have recently heard: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” “Lord, I’ll follow you wherever you go, but let me first bury my father.” “Let the dead bury the dead, you come and follow me.” It would be easy to get the impression the Jesus did not want many disciples. Of course, historians of religion know that this was the pattern of teachers and wise leaders in ancient times. They screened fairly carefully would-be followers. A great teacher, a wise man, lives up in the mountains in a cabin, isolated. A would-be disciple goes up and knocks on the door. The wise man comes to the door. “What do you want?” “I want to be your disciple.” He slams the door in his face. The person goes the second day. “I want to be your disciple.” The wise man closes the door again. And so the third day. Finally the wise man listens. “I want to be your disciple.” “Now I see you’re sincere. Come in.” This sounds something like what St. Benedict required of his novices.

Here is a variation of story you all know, but I think it’s another illustration of the same thing. A young American wanted to be a Buddhist monk. He went to Tibet, went to the abbot, “I want to be a monk.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it means seven years of silence, after which you get two words.”

“Yes.”

After seven years of total silence, the Abbot called him in and said, “You now can say two words.”

He said, “Cold breakfast.”

“Are you going to stay?”

“Yes.”

So he stays seven more years and his two words are “Hard bed.”

“Are you going to stay?”

“Yes.”

So he stays seven more years and his two words are “I quit.”

And the abbot said “Well, it’s just as well. You’ve done nothing but complain ever since you’ve been here.”

It would be easy to get the impression that Jesus didn't really want just anyone. And yet in today's Gospel he has quite a large group. There are a lot of people who say "yes" to him in spite of the demands. I think people actually prefer a challenge, something that demands discipline and sacrifice rather than something that is too watered down. I think that is particularly true of young people who are looking for religious life. There are very few nowadays, but those there are look for a community that seems to really stand for something.

Jesus wanted his disciples to say to those they met "The kingdom of God is here." If they rejected the message, the disciples were to leave. Whether people accepted the message or rejected it, the message held true. And so it is for us. We also are commissioned to spread the message, even in these times when it is not popular. Yes, the kingdom of God is here. It is a present reality. We are in a particularly good position to proclaim the kingdom because we don't have to stand on a soap box or use very evangelical language which would be unbecoming to Episcopalians. The kingdom is clearly here on these grounds, it's here in this chapel; many people feel it just driving onto this property. It's here in our hearts. All we have to do is live here, live the life and our lives will proclaim the message.