

To Luke or Not to Luke
Bob Stillerman
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
7-7-2019
Luke 10:1-11; 16-20

My theology professor, Frank Tupper, used to begin an illustration about God in this way: He'd point his finger, and he'd say:

Do you see that tiny little spec, right there?!? That's you. And now imagine this room is our planet. And you know what, our planet, which is infinitely bigger than each of us, is but a spec in our universe, which is but a spec in our cosmos. And yet, we belong to a God who is SO personal, and SO complex, and SO wonderful, that He or She has not only intricately made each of us, but also loves and values each of us with the same sense of intricacy and purpose put into God's creation.

This notion is SO absurd, SO wonderful, SO impossible, there's only one explanation for it. It's got to be true!!!

To be a Christian, or to be a Jesus-follower, or to simply be a Child of God, is to acknowledge the depth and beauty of this truth. God loves us. God is invested in us. And God is present with us, right now, whenever and wherever that might be, whatever, whomever, and however we are.

And Jesus, more than anyone we've ever known, was so wholly attuned to, and so wholly excited about this truth, that he lived as if he was wholly in God's presence. Jesus was freed of ownership – freed from Caesar, freed from a mortgage, and a salary, and a nationalism, and a masculinity, and a last name, and a religious rigidity, and a dependence on every manufactured, artificial marker of value.

And I believe that freed from such dependence on privilege, Jesus spoke with a sense of urgency about God's inbreaking realm, not to scare people into belief, nor submission, nor even hospitality, but rather because of an earnest desire to help people feel whole. If you are too concerned about the fleeting, finite, subjective riches of Caesar's world, you will never experience the lasting, infinite,

authentic love of God. And that love is too good to wait on, too pure to put off, even for a moment, or an hour, or a day.

That brings us to today's text. Yikes! It can sound harsh, and even harsher if you read verses 12-15, which were omitted from the Revised Common Lectionary, and imply a fate worse than Sodom for communities that fail to welcome the disciples.

The intensity and irritation directed at those persons/communities who do not receive the good news the seventy bring with them is unfortunate at best. I believe, and this is my opinion, but I believe that the venom directed at non-believers is intended, poorly as it comes across, to imply the urgent invitation into God's fullness right now. I also think the tone of the text reflects the frustration of a persecuted community in first-century Rome, one that wanted a world out of sync with the Jesus movement, to move with quicker pace.

And before you go getting all righteous on me, think about how you might feel speaking to people who have not yet come around to "your" way of thinking on social issues of the day. Are there days when your frustration with their pace, or your suspicion of their hard-heartedness, lead you to talk about the retribution that's coming their way? Sometimes the passion in our rhetoric, or the force of our editorial comments belies the generosity of our spirit, and even more so, of the God we claim to belong to.

If you'll allow yourself some separation, I think we can parse out a few positive aspects of today's text.

Jesus tells the seventy, and you and me as well, to act with urgency. Don't delay. Don't stop at the Seven-Eleven, or worry about if there's a three-star travel lodge to book on Priceline. Go, and let people know that a loving, caring, inclusive God is present with us right now. And when we experience that presence in community, we find a spirit that transcends the limitations of Caesar's world.

And I want to ask you, really, truly, is there anything more important than conveying this message? If we are swept up in the liberating power of God's justice, love, and grace, and we really believe that what we do here matters, why do we not engage the "mission of Sardis" – that is sharing God's love – with the

same urgency with which we engage our vocational, familial, social, and civic obligations?

Jesus had twelve close disciples, a leadership-circle if you will. And yet Jesus sent seventy people – or the whole bunch of believers – to implement the mission of his movement. Well, I don't know about you, but I don't think Sardis can be Sardis, unless all of us— that's the ordained, and the lay, and the everything in-between – unless all of us are pointed in the same direction, sharing our varied and unique gifts.

Jesus said, “Know when to be a host, and when to be a guest.” We live in a post, post-modern world (I think that's right). That means we most likely can't leave our neighborhood without running into somebody who represents a different faith, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, race, political party, fandom, or cuisine than we are used to. And thank God for such diversity. Jesus said, “Sit down at their table, and eat their food, and sing their songs, and give thanks for their hospitality. And in fellowship, you may just find they are open to hearing the news you've got to share. And you may just find God's spirit in community.”

Sardis Baptist Church, we are not Luke's community. Sure, we're kin to them. And yes, we share a lot of commonalities with them, primarily our belief in a “transformative something” born out of the life and ministry of Jesus that helps us understand the divine. But we also find ourselves catapulted two millennia into the future, and dealing with social issues and customs that are far different than theirs. Therefore, we will neither look nor act exactly like they did. For instance, they lived in a time when too few people had heard the Jesus story. We may live in a time when so many people have heard the Jesus story that its familiarity removes the urgency, wonder, and goodness of its truth.

I believe that it's incumbent on our community to give serious thought to how we'll shape our mission and purpose. I believe that we need to be creative in helping to make God's love apparent to all we encounter in a manner that is effective, but not intrusive; affectionate, but not abrasive or creepy; intellectual, but not elitist; hopeful, daring and audacious even, but not without a measure of sensibility.

I think today's text can help us in such an endeavor. We can probably agree to disagree on the need for fire and brimstone, and not spend so much time dwelling on Satan's flashing fall. If it works for Luke's folks, so be it. But I don't think we should be so quick to dismiss their urgency, or their inclusiveness, or their hosting and guesting.

Because if Sardis Baptist Church has an urgency in sharing the love of God, and recognizing and encouraging the gifts of all our community members, and of sitting at tables and breaking bread with friends and strangers alike, I think the rest of it's all gonna fall into place.

And the same God, the same spirit, the same love that fulfilled people in Luke's time, it's gonna be present in our time, too.

May it be so. And may it be soon!

Amen.