

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

8 July 2007

2 Kings 5:1-14

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Maybe I'm not supposed to wonder about the parts we're not told, but that's part of who I am. Always got to poke and ponder, figure out what I can of what happened, and let my imagination play with what I can't know but can wonder about. Now the commentaries fuss about whether it was 70 or 72 that Jesus sent out. Personally, I'm more interested in who they were and how they got to be the ones who were sent. Do you suppose Jesus asked for volunteers, and their hands were the first to spring into the air? Pick me, Oh, oh, teacher, pick me. Was it the kind of moment when he wanted to know who would go and people looked at their laps in the hope that his eyes wouldn't meet theirs, and they could keep on keeping on – doing the chores, reading the novel, fixing dinner and putting the kids to bed at night, taking care of the increasingly frail mother, going on that vacation they'd been planning for months? Do you suppose he walked up to them one at a time and stole them away from their fishing boats and laundry and committee meetings and deadlines and ball games and yard work by tapping them on the shoulder and saying, I really need you to do something important for me; please come. Or maybe it was more the Mormon type two-year nonnegotiable time of service in the mission field. You knew when you signed on you were going to be living out of a suitcase, walking door to door and more often than not being turned away; so stop your fussing and just do it. Who were they? How well equipped? And how do you think they felt about being sent?

I think it's fairly safe to say they'd never done anything like this before. No one had ever done the things Jesus was doing, or asking... no, not just asking – expecting them to do. But here they were, all lined up in front of him, getting their marching orders. You'll go in pairs to every town and place that's on our itinerary (and if they knew Jesus at all, they knew the itinerary wasn't all that well set – most any place was a place he was apt to go before they finally got to Jerusalem). I want you to go and gather together more workers for me. No, don't worry about going home to pack a bag – everything you need will be provided when you need it; no need to be slowed down because you're hauling stuff. Don't bother stopping by the ATM on your way out of town – I'll see to it that your expenses are paid and your meals are provided. When you get to a house, say to them, Peace be with you. If they open the door to you, stay there. Don't go wandering about checking out who has the softest pillows and who makes the best coffee; stay in the first home that will welcome you. Make sure they know that God and God's kingdom have been there, standing on their doorstep, eating their food, healing their sick, blessing their children. And if they don't open the door to you, be on your way – but not before you've told them the same thing: God and God's kingdom have been here. Whether they welcome you or turn you away, make sure they know who it is who came knocking.

Before you take too big a sigh of relief and say, whew, I'm glad I wasn't within reach the day he was lining up that group of 70, remember that while the specific details may have changed, the generalities have not. Jesus may have been tapping a specific several for a particular task, in part because his own sense of fast approaching deadline was building. He knew his days were numbered, and if he was going to accomplish what he'd set out to accomplish, he was going to need some help – so he rounded them up and sent them out. But I think that the sense of task hasn't lessened, and it's very likely the sense of urgency has actually increased. Sure Jesus is no longer on a death march toward the cross, but can you honestly for one minute believe that God isn't sick in the very pit of God's stomach with the way a lot of this world is being run? Can you seriously believe that God isn't frantic to get some people out there to make a difference, or at least a dent in the corruption and self-obsessed greed and callous disregard for human suffering and rapidly expanding landfills that will never have time to decompose before we're overrun with garbage, and the pile of bodies being carried off the battle fields of Baghdad and Kabul and New York and yes, even North Conway? Somehow, I still imagine Jesus standing at the front of the classroom, or by the waterfront or on a street corner, in a board room, maybe even in front of a congregation asking for recruits, saying, time is short and I need your help, who will come. Tapping people on the shoulder and saying, I really need you to do something important for me; please come.

We want to protest that we have a prior commitment and really can't make it just now, and Jesus gives us the look. Which has the likelihood of saying, think again – you can probably do more than you think; and if you really can't get away, show the people you're so busy working with and for who I am and how I want you all to live. We try to explain that our resources are limited and we really can't make them stretch any further, and Jesus says, I'm not looking for your resources, I'm looking for you – I'll take care of seeing to it that you have a place to lay your head and enough bread and water to stay strong. We protest that we're no good at public speaking and we'd never know what to say, and he comes back at us yet again: I will give you the words you need when you need them, if you'll just come with me, depend on me, and most important of all, trust me.

I really liked a story I read this week by a pastor who described a conversation with one of his elder members one Sunday after church. The man had been to the local hospital the day before and discovered that a young couple from the church had just given birth to a baby girl – with Down Syndrome. Like many of us would be apt to feel, the elder said, “Pastor, I didn't know what to say. We visited for a few minutes. They let me hold her and I told them she was beautiful. Pastor, I didn't know what to say.” Then he went on to talk about having prayed with them, thanking God for their child and asking for God's peace and blessing on their family. The pastor reassured him that it sounded like he had done as well as could be expected, and in truth, the pastor couldn't have thought of anything better to have said in such a difficult situation.

A couple of weeks later, the elder pulled the pastor aside again and showed him a note that he'd received from the new mother. She thanked him for his visit and his prayer, and then she closed her note by writing, “Thank you for not saying what so many people said and telling us how sorry you were. We are so happy to have our baby. Thank you for sharing our family's joy.” The elder was incredulous that he'd made such a difference, and that anyone would have told this

couple how sorry they were – to which the pastor went on to affirm the elder once again. A wise old man who knew how to claim a child as a citizen of the kingdom of God and to announce God's peace to her household. (Patrick J. Willson, "What to say", *The Christian Century*, June 26, 2007, page 18)

Which is precisely what Jesus was lining that 70 up to do, and what he's apt to tap us for as well – announcing the presence and power and love of God, and offering the gift of God's peace. It's really as simple as that. In the lesson we heard this morning from 2 Kings, we heard about a big and powerful commander of the army, who was not a little arrogant or slightly presumptuous – he was a lot of both! But the possibility of healing for his skin disease was put on the table by a nameless servant girl who'd been carried off into slavery when the troops had pillaged her village back in Israel. She bothered to speak up and bring attention to herself, which is the last thing most slaves ever want to do, to tell about the prophet Elisha and his ability to heal. Naaman pursued her words and sought out more information, but he wasn't much impressed with the instructions he received: go wash yourself in the dirty old Jordan River and you will be clean. As he was about to stomp off in a huff, another nameless servant stepped forward and confronted him with his arrogance and spoke words of truth: Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, you would have done it, wouldn't you? So why not do something simple like wash and be clean? Because two nameless servants were willing to step up and speak words of truth, Naaman was healed and restored to the community. Through simple words of truth and kindness, God's presence was made known, and the blessing of God's peace was felt.

Which reminds me of a story that got passed my way through some email at some point. It's the story of a poor Scottish farmer whose name was Fleming. One day, while trying to make a living for his family, he heard a cry for help coming from a nearby bog. He dropped his tools and ran to the bog. There, mired to his waist in black muck, was a terrified boy, screaming and struggling to free himself. Farmer Fleming saved the lad from what could have been a slow and terrifying death.

The next day, a fancy carriage pulled up to the Scotsman's sparse surroundings. An elegantly dressed nobleman stepped out and introduced himself as the father of the boy Farmer Fleming had saved. "I want to repay you," said the nobleman. "You saved my son's life."

"No, I can't accept payment for what I did," the Scottish farmer replied, waving off the offer.

At that moment, the farmer's own son came to the door of the family hovel. "Is that your son?" the nobleman asked.

"Yes," the farmer replied proudly.

"I'll make you a deal. Let me provide him with the level of education my son will enjoy. If the lad is anything like his father, he'll no doubt grow to be a man we both will be proud of." And that he did. Farmer Fleming's son attended the very best schools and in time, he graduated from St. Mary's Hospital Medical School in London, and went on to become known throughout the world as the noted Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of Penicillin.

Years afterward, the same nobleman's son who was saved from the bog was stricken with pneumonia. What saved his life this time? Penicillin. The name of the nobleman? Lord Randolph Churchill. His son's name? Sir Winston Churchill.

We never know where or when or how God will send us out and ask us to serve. When we're mired in the muck - or when we come upon someone else who is stuck and needs our help. Through the voice of a servant or a mentally challenged person or a homeless person parked on a street corner or in the presence of a family holding a newborn child who happens to be different than the child they were expecting. In the cleansing bath of a dirty old river or in a meal shared at the soup kitchen or while emptying a bedpan for someone who's sick. We can trust that even now, God is standing before us, wanting to send us out: to proclaim the presence and power and love of God, and speak the blessed word of God's peace. Are we willing to go? Are we willing to speak? Will we let God work through us, even here and now, or wherever the day may take us?

May it be so.
Amen.