

IT'S COMING NEAR

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Text: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

SCRIPTURE

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

The Word of the Lord Thanks be to God!

SERMON

How many advertisements do you encounter each day? How many ads do you see or hear throughout an average day from the time you get up in the morning, until the time you lay your head on your pillow and close your eyes? Back in the 70s the average American was exposed to about 500 ads per day. Today in 2019, we are exposed to ads through print media, (everything from junk mail to billboards to publications) as well as television and radio, but much more rampant are all the ads we encounter when we go online, browsing the internet, watching YouTube, or any social media. Most of us have had it happen. You go online to find, say, the phone number of someone to repair your clothes dryer, and for the next three weeks, every time you go on Google or FaceBook there are pop up ads for local appliance sales. So would anyone like to guess as to how many ads the average person in the US is exposed to in one day? It is a bit hard to pin that number down, but the experts think we see or hear between 4,000 and 10,000 various types of advertisements each day.

Now, if that boggles your mind and makes you wonder how anyone can even begin to process all that information, the answer is that we can't. Most of us completely tune out the vast majority of these ads. Someone has compared it to walking through a swarm of 4,000 gnats. They are a terrible nuisance but other than the ones that are right in your face you don't care about the rest. Even so, you really don't like the ones that are right in your face, and your main objective is to swat them away. But while there does not seem to be any slow down, marketers are starting to realize this overkill. A company can spend a lot of money on an advertising campaign that will expose their product to millions and millions of people, but if there is nothing about those ads that make them remarkable in any way, most people will tune them out and the resulting sales will be minimal.

This has led to new strategies in promoting various products and one of the hottest trends is something called "influencer marketing." The idea is to find someone who has influence on potential customers, and get that person to promote your product. This is not simply a celebrity endorsement. This is not paying William

Shatner to promote your law firm. After all, what does he know about the law? No, this is finding someone who is respected or has a certain following and get that person to explain the benefits of your product. Let me give you an example. There is a restaurant in Massachusetts called Ken's Steak House. The owners started producing a line of salad dressings and wanted to promote it nationwide. Now, there is a website called Food Beast that has over a million followers. Food Beast makes videos for YouTube with crazy recipes, things like making incredible meals with ramen noodles as the main ingredient. An arrangement was made where Food Beast made a video with a recipe for a ranch taco salad cone; that is a taco salad that is eaten in a cone, as in an ice cream cone. However, they used Ken's Ranch Salad dressing, showed the bottle, and mentioned it by name. Sales of Ken's Salad Dressing spiked after Food Beast posted that video. That is influencer marketing. Food Beast influenced its followers to buy that salad dressing.

Of course, the greatest influencers are friends, someone you know. It doesn't matter what you are thinking about buying, if someone you know has bought a particular brand of shoes or lawn mower or baby's car seat, their rating, good or bad, will have a greater influence on you than any ad you might have seen or heard. When surveys are taken after someone has bought a product, more than 80% will say that a friend's recommendation had the greatest effect on their decision. What is different today, is that through modern technology, who we consider our "friends" has expanded. Someone may do a blog, or make some interesting YouTube videos, or run a FaceBook page on a particular topic, and they are regarded as trustworthy or having some expertise. Their followers feel like they have a special connection or relationship, therefore these individuals have a lot of influence. So one article I read on this said that marketers should start thinking of themselves as "relationship managers" rather than ad agencies or promoters. From our scripture lesson for today, I would say that Jesus was one of the first of these relationship managers.

Our text for this morning is about Jesus sending out 70 of his followers on a little marketing campaign. They were to go into various villages and towns in the area with the message that the kingdom of God, or the beloved community, has come near to them. Jesus gave them very specific instructions on how they were to go about their tasks, what they were to take and what they were to do. Now, some might call this an evangelism campaign, but the strategy that Jesus uses is very different from what we normally think of when we hear the word "evangelism." Perhaps that is why our efforts today are often not very effective. So maybe we can learn something from these instructions that Jesus gives.

But before we get into this we need to go to the chapter before where an interesting incident takes place, that is pivotal to the whole gospel of Luke. In Luke 9:51 it says, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face towards Jerusalem." From this point on, Luke is describing Jesus as on his way to the cross, on his way to Jerusalem. But in the next few verses it says that the residents of a Samaritan village "did not receive him." In other words, Jesus and his entourage were not given permission to pass through this town on their way to Jerusalem. He and his disciples had to take a detour around this community.

This is key to understanding what is going on in our text for today, because of the disciples' reaction to this inconvenience. James and John are outraged and ask, "Lord do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Now, granted, this was an insult, but James and John are ready to nuke the whole town, men, women and children. "Let's show them, Lord. Let's wipe them all out. Blow them up, all of them down to the tiniest baby and the chickens scratching around in the back yard." Hmm... Do you get the impression that James and John are missing something here?

Jesus did too. The next verse says he "rebuked them" and some of the ancient manuscripts add a line where Jesus says "I did not come to destroy the lives of human beings, but to save them." But this little scene is important to understanding what happens next in chapter 10. It is as if Jesus realizes that James and John, along with the rest of the 12, still have a lot to learn. This marketing campaign is not so much about making converts as it is a lesson for them. Essentially Jesus is saying, "Okay, let's go over this one more time. James, John, Peter and the rest of you, this is not all that hard. All my followers can do this, so everyone, and I mean everyone, is going out to spread my good news."

Jesus expands on his instructions. He says, “We are not calling down fire from heaven on anyone. You are not to be vicious or nasty or heavy handed. You are not the predators here. If anything it is the other way around; you are the lambs and they are the wolves. So, you have to travel light. Keep moving. Don’t get bogged down with a lot of baggage.”

So, if this is indeed a marketing campaign, what exactly is the product? Just what is this good news that they are trying to get people to consider? Jesus tells us in verse 5: “Whatever house you enter, first say, “Peace to this house.” The answer is peace, shalom, God’s peace, God’s healing, wholeness; God turning everything into the way it should be. No, James and John, we are not nuking anyone into submission. Completely the opposite. We are bringing to anyone and everyone peace, even in the face of hostility, insult and danger. As such there can be times when we are incredibly vulnerable, like lambs among wolves, but that is the way it has to be. So, just how were they supposed to do this? Well, Jesus talks about eating, of all things. He says, “Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide...” As strange as it may sound, I believe that is the most critical instruction for the entire enterprise.

In that culture, as it is in many parts of the world today, hospitality was regarded as a high, honor bound duty. The host would spare no expense, giving all that they could to make sure that the guest was satisfied. At times, the host’s family would do without, possibly even skipping the meal entirely to ensure that the guest was well fed. In turn then, the polite guests would recognize and appreciate the graciousness of the host, eating whatever was set before them. It would be a terrible insult to decline what was offered. The hosts were giving you something out of the kindness of their hearts. It would be unkind not to accept their gift.

When Jesus sends out his followers on their mission this is not some sort of arrogant manipulative strategy to make a lot of converts. They are not invading enemy territory. It is not some sort of military campaign. They certainly are not supposed to even fantasize about calling down fire from heaven. They are to go as polite and gracious guests, accepting whatever their hosts are willing to offer. They are to go, be a blessing, but more than that, be willing to receive a blessing in return.

In other words, it was not simply a matter of getting the word out to as many people as quickly as possible. They were to go and start a relationship with those they encountered. They were to be “influencers,” building friendships, creating trust, listening and trying to understand what was going on in the lives of those they encountered. Then when they offered God’s peace it was indeed a genuine blessing. It was something unique and appropriate for each individual. It was not a mass marketing campaign. It was relationship management. I have told you before about the word “companion,” but let me remind you again. The first part of the word “com” means “with.” Communication is talking with someone. A committee is people who meet with each other. The second part of the word, “pan,” means “bread,” as in PANeras, where they make bread. A companion is someone you share your bread with and they share their bread with you. A companion is someone who sticks with you, literally through thick and thin. That is where this phrase comes from. When there is abundance you cut the bread thick. When there is little you cut the bread thin.

I have been doing a lot of thinking and reflecting as my time with you is winding down, what is important and what should be top priority. One concern that has been around for years is membership. It is obvious that our numbers are declining. Every year, when we print up the annual report, there have been more losses than gains. There is no way to deny that. But do you know what? It might shock you to hear me say this, but I really don’t think anyone out there in our community of Marion is interested in joining our church. It doesn’t matter who is the pastor, or what kind of worship or music or programs we might have. I don’t think very many people at all are really interested in being a member of this church, or any church for that matter. No one is interested in just being a member for membership sake.

But I do think there are a lot of people all around us who are looking for companionship; people here in this room; people we encounter every day. They are lonely and isolated, and long to be connected with others, long for friendship and meaningful relationships. They might be very interested in what goes on in this church if it would help them find companionship. But it works two ways. A true companion not only shares their bread with you, they are willing to accept the bread you have to offer. Companions eat what is set before them. They

interact and listen to each other. They pay attention. They accept each other for who they are. Companions not only receive the blessings you have to offer; they offer blessings back to you. And if you are not willing to receive as well as to give, then you can't be a true companion. Or put it this way: if you want to have influence, you have to be willing to be influenced. Otherwise, why would anyone want to have a conversation with you? That is probably why a lot of what is called "evangelism" today is so ineffective. It is not about companionship but about manipulation. And if all we are interested in is adding more numbers to our membership rolls, we are not going to get very far. But if we are truly interested in being friends, offering companionship, establishing relationships, well, that is something else altogether.

Here is the important thing for you to realize, the one main thing I want you to understand: **no pastor can do this**. No pastor can be a companion to someone in the community the way that you can. So, who do you know that you are willing to offer a little companionship, maybe literally by taking them to lunch? Who do you know that you are willing to accept from them whatever they have to offer? Who do you know that you are not only willing to be a blessing for, but who are you willing to receive a blessing from? I do not have any influence over that person, and neither will your next pastor. I don't, her or she won't, but you do. So, think about it. Who might this person be?

Jesus said to these 70 he sent out that they were to offer peace, shalom, to every house that they entered, and then he says "The kingdom of God (the Beloved Community) has come near." Not, it will come near when you die and go to heaven. Not it will come near on some far off day when the world comes to an end. Not, it might come near, if you say these words and sign this paper and fill out a pledge card. Not, the Beloved Community is an impossible goal we are working for in a metaphorical way. But it has come near, right now, right here, in this very place and time. What is Jesus talking about? How is the Beloved Community present when these 70 go wandering around being guests in people's houses?

Well, are you at all inclined to go and be the guest of someone you really dislike? In fact, isn't that one of the most awkward, uncomfortable situations, when someone invites you over for dinner and you really don't like that person, and you really don't want to go? But, if you are excited about accepting an invitation that says there is something about that person that you are drawn to, that you like. When we are willing to be a guest, when true hospitality is offered and reciprocated, that can be the beginning of a deep relationship. It can be the start of love, the foundation of the **Beloved** Community.

The story from Luke about Jesus sending out the 70, really does have a lot to say to us today. Jesus gives all these very practical instructions. He tells them not to take along extra money, no traveler's checks or credit cards. He says don't even pack a suitcase or an extra pair of shoes. Go be a polite guest and eat what is offered. It is all rather mundane, physical, seemingly normal kind of stuff. But the results are amazing. The disciples say, "Lord in your name even the demons submit to us!" We were able to share God's peace. We were able to turn back the forces of evil, that divide and isolate and cause such despair and loneliness. The instructions were physical but it was a great spiritual victory. Jesus says he saw Satan fall, and I am not entirely sure what that means, other than it is a good thing.

So what does this tell us? Perhaps it shows that when we go out into the world trying to be spiritual and pious, we will only come across as holier-than-thou. But if we go out, humble, practical, being polite guests concerned with very down to earth matters, well then wonderful spiritual things can happen. God's beloved community comes near. But that should not be a surprise to us, because, after all, we, here in this room, we are companions. On a regular basis, we share bread and a cup. We eat what is set before us, common, ordinary everyday things. But it is also about peace, God's shalom, and how through something being broken we all become whole. It is about communion and community, God's Beloved Community. It is coming near; right here, right now, in this very place. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.