

***Subversive Questions: The Upside-Down Way
of Jesus***

What Will You Do with the Dust?

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

I've titled today's sermon: What Will We Do with the Dust? This is one of a few questions I have that come out of today's NT passage. Jesus liked to teach and be provocative by asking questions. So, this Summer, we have been looking at some subversive questions that come out of the gospel of Luke that prod us to learn the upside-down ways of Jesus.

From the start, I have to admit my reservations about today's text. Maybe you're like me: my defenses fly up when I think about classic evangelism (which, at first glance here, seems to be the point). These reservations come from the fact that the church's evangelistic mission has a troubled, even violent, past. Since Christianity became the state religion of the Roman empire in 380 AD, the church has struggled to keep separate the colonizing agenda of Empire and the move of God's true kingdom in the world. This has led to major identity issues over the centuries. This is why I find it important to continue asking the questions: What does discipleship *really* look like? What does it look like for us today?

With some of these thoughts and questions in mind, I want to invite you to join me in wrestling a bit with a challenging text this morning.

Verse 1 says... "...the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go." (10:1)

As it turns out, Mormons get their model for missions from this NT pattern of going out in pairs. How many of us have entertained such

visitors? I think Mormons are nice, hospitable people. Right after getting married, Katie and I had Mormon neighbors who welcomed us to our new neighborhood by leaving baked cookies on our doorstep. I bitterly accepted their gift in that young season of my conservative Christian arrogance. Eventually I warmed up to them and we would become friends who shared meals together in our homes. It was a humbling experience for me.

Setting aside them as people, it's hard to get on board with their church's model of door-to-door evangelism. And thinking about this verse: A dozen disciples being sent out seems mild and comfortable, but 70 is an intimidating number. It's hard to envision anything different than what I experience at times on the streets and in the subway stations of Manhattan, where I live. Often we encounter there the familiar: religious condemnations being blasted through bullhorns or microphones. Some shove tracks in people's faces as they walk by. Sometimes it's just one doing this; Sometimes they show up in groups, a few of them stationed on each corner of an intersection. Is this what Jesus had in mind when he sent us out?

I think the reason this is uncomfortable for me is that this mirrors a model of conquest. Is Christian mission merely conquest by another name? It's unclear if the mention of 70 in this text is meant to read 72. The gospel writer is following normal practice of drawing upon OT imagery. Many believe it's either a symbolic reference to the seventy elders appointed by Moses in the book of Numbers or the table of nations in Genesis, which lists 72 nations in all. Either number suggests a *symbolic listing* of all the known world. In this way, Luke's number here speaks to a fullness... a full representation of those being sent out, making the point that it's not just an exclusive few anymore. The implication would then be... in their mission, they are not being sent *to* the world but going *with and among* the world. Kind of like how I think of my pastoral ministry here: not something that is done *to* you as much as ministering *among* you, where I too receive ministry when we do life and ministry together. Last week, we talked about the move from service *to* people to a mutuality, like being in a ballroom.

70 or 72 is also notably much larger than 12. This seems to be an intentional expansion to include more than that smaller circle of male disciples. We know there were a few women who played a significant role in Paul's ministry, so this expansion could be a way to even undermine patriarchy. The mention of moving out in pairs also speaks to a communal nature of discipleship, not being something we are meant to go at alone. It is a relational model.

A more expansive discipleship characterized by a beautiful, full diversity and equality that is relational... If that is the intention of this opening verse, it's a model of being sent out... I can get on board with.

In the next verse... "[Jesus] 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.' " (10:2)

I share some of the same reservations with other biblical commentators who find the harvest metaphor here problematic. Is it right to reduce people to a crop to be gathered up? Again, from our wounded vantage looking back through history, going out to collect people like a harvest is a thought that sends up all kinds of negative signals for me—maybe for you too.

This is not *helped* to think of the farming tools used for harvesting: A large sickle is swung to chop down loads of crop at the same time, which are tossed into baskets or onto backs of trucks. In today's raids and deportations, ICE agents only give us another disturbing image. These too are being sent out in groups to collect a harvest. You can see how this metaphor can sour quickly. For the church, is growing a membership merely the collection of salvation statements from a nameless bunch—as if just saying you follow Jesus was ever the point? Jesus, by his life and ministry, shows us a relational model. It's as if our salvation is collectively bound up together. That it is relational... acknowledges its messiness and the ambiguity that often defines the honest journey of faith.

Some suggest that what is meant here by “harvest” then, indicates the slow, intentional process necessary to bring something to full maturity, to a wholeness. My girls were educating me earlier this week that it takes about 2 years to grow a pineapple. That thought made us extra-appreciative when we ate one, having in mind the lengthy process it undertakes from crown to kitchen table. If our labor is not simply the collection of souls—*whatever that might mean*—but a striving, an intentionality, to help bring people to wholeness and maturity, I can get on board with that. This sort of work gives the image not of slicing through crop with a large sickle, but the careful attending of a gardener, who prunes bad branches and leaves, removes harmful rocks and weeds, giving attention often, even daily, to assist in the growth of the harvest. That, to me, is Jesus-like mission.

In the next verse, Jesus says... “Go on your way; I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.” (10:3)

In keeping with the theme of the morning, I’ve also struggled with this language. I mean, is anyone signing up... with that kind of job description? Is this the abundant life Jesus had in mind... To be an appetizer in a ravenous world? There does seem to be a victim mentality for some. This could come from viewing culture, or anything outside one’s own particular worldview, as a threat, like wolves ready to pounce. This kind of thinking leads one to isolate. It can fuel an escapist mentality. But hardly ever faithful discipleship.

Jesus is also called the Lamb of God and surely we would quickly identify with the lamb if given the choice between these two from opposite ends of the food chain. Yet, if we’re honest, at times the Church, particularly here in the West, has been as wolves among lambs. That was the whole point of the Crusades: pursuing and devouring those who didn’t submit to Christian belief. Even today, our national brand of Christianity—*keeping the Christian label to make the point*—seek out individuals who deviate from acceptable norms, the queer and trans community, the immigrant, the church that centers female leadership, the divorcé.

Evolution gives us “survival of the fittest”, a top-down power structure; but Jesus subverts this and here resets the power structure: “You are (instead) to be lambs among wolves.” His’ is a *power-under* model instead of *power-over*. Do not enter the space of another thinking you are the ones on top; you are to be the meek one, the vulnerable one. Your strength will be shown not in how you devour those beneath you but through your posture of service. Now we’re seeing why the workers are few.

Jesus doubles down... “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals, and greet no one on the road.” (10:4)

In other words, be as the one in need. It’s like Jesus was aware of the Messiah complex before he himself was even crucified. My defenses, here, are raised for other reasons. This week when preparing to join the family in New Orleans for the long weekend, I packed my carryon like I was going away on an exotic 2-week vacation. I’m your classic over-packer. Jesus’ call to not pack anything in order to completely rely on the hospitality of strangers not only raises so much anxiety for me but challenges my worldview.

The reasons why I was initially so cold with my new Mormon neighbors many years ago had little to do with their beliefs. It was that plate of cookies. It was because they reached out to me first and showed me kindness when it was me who was supposed to show kindness first. They were to be *my* evangelistic mission. You see, a Messiah complex can get rather petty. It is irked by reciprocity and mutuality. It hurts to receive what it seeks to give. That dynamic between us was humbling. Things change quickly though when you are invited into another’s home and even fed by them. When you’re the one taken in and cared for, petty differences can melt away.

We’d rather have a way out. We’d rather have our bags packed, sandals on and strapped, ready to hit the road if these do not take what we’re offering. Yet, without a suitcase, and a to-go dinner, we’re forced to work through and prioritize the relationship with the other.

This position of vulnerability is Jesus' subversive, upside-down way. This continues to challenge our practice of hospitality which mostly avoids mutuality.

Jesus said: "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if a person of peace is there, your peace will rest on that person, but if not, it will return to you." (10:5-6)

I want to conclude with Jesus' message of peace and how we are to respond to the stranger. This commission to share peace comes in the same breath as the instructions, "Whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet in protest." Of all the troubling language given in today's text, I don't know why this image might be the most troublesome for me. Maybe because it seems like a complete 180 from everything else Jesus seems to be saying here.

Many take this at face value, that by shaking the dust off of one's feet, one marks that home or town for God's judgment. This hardly feels like the vulnerable and radically hospitable posture suggested throughout this passage and in other places. That feels more like: "accept our message or else..." And we are back to conquest mentality. But, some point out that this ultimatum was likely an *interpretive expansion* in some translations of the text. This means that it was added by interpreters along the way, likely to make a turn toward God's judgement.

Others argue that to "shake the dust off of one's feet" is Jesus' way of saying, leave the home or town as if you never even set foot there—don't even take the dust with you, literally a zero-carbon footprint, but socially. To be a radical peacemaker one has to also consider, how will I respond even when rejected... even when someone disagrees with me? Peacemaking, peace-giving is never dependent on the other, even if it is *better* shared. Jesus says it will never return void.

Pope Leo greeted some 70,000 pilgrims from over 100 countries for a Pentecost vigil a couple of weeks ago. His words to them were:

“The earth will rest, justice will prevail, the poor will rejoice and peace will return, once we no longer act as predators, but as pilgrims; no longer each of us for ourselves, but walking alongside one another.”

I’ve always said that the church will truly be the church when it no longer has enemies. What will we do with the dust? My pastoral advice is the same I’d tell my kids: We cannot control others but we do have a choice in how we respond. When we live as lambs and no longer as the predator, peace will be our MO. This is radical discipleship. It’s radical because it turns the whole system of how we relate to one another upside-down, it makes little worldly sense.

If there’s a takeaway this morning it’s this: be *this* brand of disciple. Our world is starving not for saviors but for companions—fellow pilgrims on the road—for gardeners and nurturers. Those who stand in need of this kind of relational care are plentiful. Indeed, the laborers for this kind of work are few. Be one of the few. Amen.