

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth F. Keeler
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (C)
Sunday, July 7, 2019

Isaiah 66:10-14
Psalm 66:1-8
Galatians 6:7-16
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

I hope, I trust, we're all beginning to experience summer as that lovely season when we can ease into a gentler pace, let go of our need to accomplish, and simply do less. Long, hot days are the perfect time even to be a bit lazy. This downshifting offers us an opportunity to notice things we don't always notice when we're so busy. Perhaps to think about things a little differently. With this in mind, please note that today is our third Sunday hearing from the Gospel of Luke and between now and the end of November, straight through Ordinary Time, Luke will be our regular Gospeler. With this consistency of Luke's voice in our ears and minds and hearts, perhaps we can settle back this summer and begin to notice some of Luke's important themes. We can even start today by tuning our ears to Luke and recognizing one of his overarching themes - the expansiveness and inclusiveness of God's mission for the entire world. We'll see this over and over again in Luke; how God's Kingdom extends not just to a chosen few, but to Jews and Gentiles alike, men and women, those who are free and those who are enslaved. In short - what Jesus Christ brings to the world is for everyone.

We pick up this morning in Luke Chapter ten hearing about Jesus sending seventy out in mission. Already his work is gaining steam. Whereas Jesus sent The Twelve out in Chapter nine, now a chapter later, it's seventy, a symbolic number pulled from Genesis symbolizing all the nations of the world. Again, implying that all of humanity is to be enlisted and included in God's saving work. These seventy are sent out as sort of advance-parties to towns Jesus himself will visit. He tells them there is an abundant harvest but there must be more laborers. They are like lambs venturing into the midst of wolves and they must travel lightly without purse, bag, or sandal. Most importantly, the very first thing they are to do when they encounter people is to offer peace. Jesus commands: "Whatever house you enter first say, 'Peace to this house'". And so Jesus says to us, even today: "First, you must offer peace".

The theme of God's peace extended to the world is not unique to Luke, of course. God's peace dominates our Christian understanding of how God works. It infuses our liturgy and theology. We talk about the peace of God passing human understanding, we extend peace to one another as part of our corporate worship, and many of us sign our correspondence with the simple five letters that spell out the one syllable word - peace. But what does it really mean that we, like the seventy, as Christians, are charged to be bearers of God's peace? We refer to peace so much I can't help but wonder if we've lost our bearings around what peace even means.

If the question were posed, "what is peace" what might your answer be? I imagine many of us would offer something about the absence of war or conflict or strife. That seems like a good enough answer but peace, or shalom in the Biblical context, and in our Christian context, is more nuanced. God's peace is not just about the absence of conflict. True peace actually requires taking that which is broken and restoring it to wholeness. And so whether it's in our lives, our relationships, or out in the world, God's peace, or claiming to be bearers of God's peace, involves our efforts for healing and restoration. In short, working to make the world right and healthy and good for all people.

This more holistic understanding of God's peace, and being bearers of God's peace, is challenging because it asks more of us than just our hopes and desires that everyone get along. Participating in God's peace means we have to fix things that are broken. It means we have to work towards everyone having the chance of a life that includes dignity, that we diligently work towards lasting solutions for the betterment of the whole human race. This expansive understanding of God's mission is what we will hear about for the next five months in Luke's Gospel. It also what we hear about today when Jesus sends his followers out with offers of peace.

Now, I don't know about you, but this charge of being bearers of God's peace in the world can feel pretty intimidating to me. And remember summer is a season for us to rest and contemplate. But summer can also be a time for us to stretch and think about things a little differently, perhaps more expansively. So I must ask us to consider, are we really doing everything we can to be bearers of God's peace in the world? And, as we contemplate playing our individual parts in that restoration work, we might begin by noticing that when Jesus sent out the seventy, he did not condition their offerings of peace on whom the recipients might be. Jesus never mentioned judging worthiness, or how deserving others might, or might not, be of receiving God's peace.

Jesus keeps things simple: First, offer peace - lead with peace. It may be hard for us to hear, but Jesus puts no conditions or restrictions on whom the receivers of his peace might be; not race, or gender, or sexual orientation, or political party affiliation, or even immigration status. Christianity just doesn't work that way.

Friends, our Christian inclination must be one of extending peace to a broken and hurting world. I appreciate it's challenging but we all have our own parts to play, and summer is the perfect time for us to imagine and discern our roles in being bearers of God's peace.

I'll just close with this last thought: We don't seek to be bearers of God's peace because of who others are, we bring God's peace to the world because of who we are and who we follow. Amen.