

PROPER 9, July 7, 2019, Year C

- Our Gospel today prompts us to ask an important question. We know that Jesus chose and sent out his 12 disciples in mission. *But what about this sending out of seventy others* that we hear about today. **What does this tell us about the the Church, and its true purpose?**
- Given the state of our human nature and the way our culture shapes us, many of us will answer *this question about the purpose of the Church* in a *common* way. We are likely to say, *'the church exists to help me!'* When we say this, we usually have in mind our *local* congregation. In doing so, we acknowledge its role in responding to real the needs we have. *For the Church is always made real in a local gathering.* And, through the ministry of dioceses and parishes, identifiable human needs receive attention. As true as all this may be, **can you see what's missing here**, as we reflect on *the purpose of the Church?*
- *What's missing, of course, is a concept of the Church as a whole, which we overlook when we focus on one or more of its parts.* What can be missing in our typical perception of the purpose of the church is an understanding of the Church's primary role of *reaching those who are on the outside*, besides attending to those who are *already within*.
- With the publication of the 1979 Prayer Book, leaders in the Episcopal Church have joined others in helping us *recover the best answer about the purpose of the Church.*¹ They have helped us see that **there are two basic ways of answering the question** - one which focuses on *the needs of present members*, and the other, which focuses on *those who are not yet members*. Two words sum up these two basic approaches to the purpose of the Church: **maintenance**, and **mission**.
- Let's start with **maintenance**. This approach sees the purpose of the church mainly as *providing us with* opportunities for *worship*, Christian *formation*

and fellowship, as well as parishioner care. Here, the focus tends to be on *maintaining the services from which we presently benefit* ~ and, on how we can *receive* more of the same. As a result, with attention directed toward *what members may get*, this familiar approach easily ends up encouraging a general *passivity*.

- Seeing the *purpose of the Church* in terms of *mission* involves an historic, biblical, as well as broader approach to why we are here. This *more encompassing* approach remembers that *the first and primary purpose of the Church is to respond to our Lord's call*. We hear this call *both in his teaching* during his earthly life, *and in his ministry* to his disciples after his resurrection. According to this missional understanding of the Church's purpose, *we first direct our attention toward what is not yet, rather than to what already is. A mission-focused parish centers itself on sharing the Good News with those who have not yet heard it*, and on responding to the real shape of the world around us.
- This *biblical* approach to the Church *includes*, and therefore *does not neglect*, such things as worship, formation, and parishioner care. But *it does not see these things as ends in themselves*. A mission-centered concept of the Church sees our participation in *worship*, our engagement in ongoing discipleship *formation* and *care* for those in our midst, as *things we do to prepare for engaging in the mission of the Church*. They are *not* the mission of the Church *themselves*. Instead, we do these things *to help us prepare to share the Good News* and respond to real needs in the world.
- It should not surprise us that *these two different concepts of the Church's purpose* carry with them *differing concepts of ministry*. A *maintenance-centered* way of understanding the purpose of the church perceives *ministry as something we receive, from designated and trained leaders, who provide ministry to and for us*. Within this model, we remember as *our*

primary example **the ministry of the disciples** who became apostles. The Lord called and commissioned *the Twelve to carry on his ministry* after he was taken up. Then, through his gift of God's Spirit, **they and their appointed successors** provide several things: **worship** embodying the presence of the Risen Lord; **teaching** re-presenting what he had earlier taught; and, continuing manifestations of his **care** for his flock.

- This **maintenance concept of ministry** provides us with a comparative reference point for understanding how a **mission-centered** understanding the Church's ministry is *different*. **A mission-centered understanding of ministry sees it as something we offer to others, rather than as a service that we receive.** Therefore, this approach *not only* commemorates the commissioning of the Twelve. It **also** honors **the commissioning of the seventy**, about which we hear today in our Gospel reading.
- Whereas the ministry of the twelve becomes associated with *the ordained ministers of the Church*, **the ministry of the seventy represents the ministry of the laity, the whole Body of the Church, and of all the baptized.** Like the seventy, **we are all sent out as bearers of the Kingdom** and of the Kingdom's **Risen Lord**. And so, **we** are able to say, to all those we meet, "**the Kingdom of God has come near to you!**" This is *not* a *theoretical* statement. It specifically refers to the Lord's presence *within every baptized person*. For every one of us becomes a moving temple of the Holy Spirit, wherever we go, and whatever we do.
- **At Baptism, we are all appointed and commissioned as ministers of the Gospel. Commissioning is co-missioning** - we are joined to **the Lord**; we are joined to **the Lord's Risen Body**; and therefore, **we are joined to the Lord's ongoing mission**. The Lord's ongoing mission is something more expansive *than simply providing* worship, formation and care, in and to the local

congregation. The Lord's ongoing mission is *to the whole world*, and it involves announcing *the real presence of God's Kingdom*.

- God's Kingdom is made present *in* and *through* each one of us by the Lord who commissions us. We are not only sent out in his name. We are sent out with his Spirit. Perhaps, we might have occasion to marvel that "*even the demons are subject to us*." The truth of this statement *does not rest on* any attribute of *ours*. Demons are subject to us *only because* we bear the Lord's Spirit-transforming presence. For *Jesus is Lord over heaven and earth... and, therefore, Lord over every spirit not in accord with the Holy Spirit*.
- Notice the Lord's words to *the Seventy* upon their return. He says, "*do not rejoice at this*, that the spirits *submit* to you." Jesus does not dispute that *evil spirits will* submit to us. They are *indeed subject* to us. But, *only, subject to us in so far as we ourselves are subject to the Lord*. He just does not want us to focus on *how or whether they may be subject to us*. For –*in our human pride* – we misunderstand and misrepresent the source of his power. We should remember his words to the seventy: "See, *I have given you authority... over all the power of the enemy*; and nothing will hurt you." And this is true because of the reality in which he wants us to rejoice : We are part of his Body, the Church. Therefore, in him, we have an ongoing mission to the world. *Through us, his mission continues*.



James Tissot, *Christ Sending Out the Seventy Disciples, Two by Two*

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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."

Notes:

¹ See the Baptismal Rite in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP:299ff), as well as the Catechism (especially the sections on The Church, and The Ministry {BCP:854ff})