

## Stranger Harvests

Proper 9C, Luke 10.1-11, 16-20

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A couple of weeks ago, when Ardelle and I were spending a little quality time together in quarantine, our friend James and his daughter Louisa dropped a package off on our porch. Now, a gift from James is cause for great excitement in our house. He's a potter and a photographer and a forager and a walker and just a curious and creative observer of the world. We brought the box into our house, and found a quilt inside. I guess I didn't mention that James is also a quilter.

All of James's projects have stories. He learned to make quilts for his master's thesis in Documentary Studies at Duke. On walks through his neighborhood, he would occasionally see household belongings piled at the curb just before garbage pickup. He soon realized it was refuse from evictions, in which he found prom gowns and tiny backpacks and, once, a journal in which a child expressed her undying love for Justin Bieber on page after page in heartbreaking detail. Where the rest of us see garbage, James sees stories. So, he began making quilts with some of what he gathered (and thoroughly laundered) as a way of meditating on the stories buried in the refuse of an eviction. He passed one of them on to Ardelle and me. It's beautiful.

That's James. Or rather, that's one aspect of James. He's also the guy who finds lion's mane mushrooms in the flowerbed of a municipal building that are as beautiful as any you'll find at the farmer's market. And the guy who once had a potter friend make terracotta bells from clay he'd dug from the excavation site of a cheap hotel. And the guy who can tell you who the most talented graffiti artists are in his town and ... well ... maybe you get the gist of James.

And maybe you'll soon come to see why James is who came to mind as I read about Jesus sending seventy disciples, two by two, off into the nearby towns.

These pairs may bring to mind missionaries you've encountered. It makes me think of the movie *Airplane*. Remember Ted Striker being accosted in the terminal by proselytizers with flowers and tracts from every conceivable spiritual tradition until he goes into full on martial arts mode to fend them off? We think of missionaries as bearing something they think the world needs. Maybe it's the truth they think will save you or food and medicine they hope will nourish and heal you, but the idea is that the missionary has something she has been charged to deliver to a lost or needy world, right?

Well, did you notice how carefully Jesus told his followers that the sending of the seventy would not be that kind of project? He said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few ... 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..." If there's a term for an anti-missionary, that's what these people seem to be.

Consider that initial metaphor of a harvest. It seems like a better one would be missionaries with a table at a market filled with healthy food. But Jesus tells his followers that the world is what's full of life and fruitfulness and miracle, and he wants them to go out and harvest it. He also very explicitly sends these people out empty handed and vulnerable so there's no question who is providing something to whom. They're lambs, not wolves. They're the weak ones, not the ones with the power or in control. They'll walk into the world barefoot, without even a bag in which to carry a coin, saying "Peace to this house!" wherever they go. And if they are welcomed, they're to sit down

to a meal with their welcomers. And then go cure the sick, saying that the kingdom of God has come near.

Do you see why it's my friend James who came to mind, rather than any stereotypical missionary? Jesus is teaching his followers to see that the world beyond them is bursting with life and stories and possibilities, and he doesn't want them to believe for a second that they're the ones who have everything that's needed. I think he wants to give them, and us, eyes to see the world in a different way.

So, there seems to be something in a community that is willing to receive people with nothing to offer that Jesus wants his disciples to notice and celebrate. And maybe it's that in towns like these, a culture is alive that's very similar to what he's trying to cultivate in these seventy disciples. A town that receives people who show up without bags or purses or sandals, that must be a place that's used to seeing the world beyond its borders, not as full of threats and enemies, but as a great field of possibility, ripe and ready for harvest. A community that sees the world like Jesus does would greet even an empty-handed stranger with welcome and expectation, because even someone who appears to possess nothing surely embodies some kind of gift in this world God has chocked so full of gifts.

But Jesus keeps talking. And a hopeful, expectant passage gets a little more ominous. What he says next is that even though this is a fruitful world, ripe for harvest, some places can be dangerous and inhospitable to people they don't think have anything to offer. And here's the curious second part to Jesus's upside-down missionary project. He says that if you show up empty handed in a town, and they do not receive you, don't stand on the street corner and start converting these heathens. He says, "Get out of there. Shake the dust from your sandal-less feet. You don't want anything of that place to cling to you." It's as if he's more worried that a place with anti-kingdom of God values such as these might contaminate the disciples he's trying to form.

I must say, this passage lands in a particular way on Independence Day weekend. I was taught as a boy to be very proud that, even if it was a gift from France, one of the symbols of what my country stands for is a statue in New York Harbor that bears a poem by Emma Lazarus. The last stanza, you'll remember, reads:

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me ..."

By the light of today's gospel, these words strike me as profoundly Christian. And not because the poet was a Christian. And not because the poem makes reference at all to the existence of God or Jesus of Nazareth. It is Christian because it describes the kind of place Jesus tells his seventy to look for, doesn't it? A place that welcomes the foreigner, not only if they come bearing wealth and advanced degrees, but a place that extends hopeful and vulnerable welcome to empty, poor, homeless refugees, possibly fleeing some terrible far off storm.

There's a sense in which it makes no sense to call any earthly nation Christian, given so much of what Jesus taught about where our ultimate loyalties must lie. A nation certainly isn't Christian because it says prayers to a Christian God before football games or swears in its presidents with their hands on a Bible, inside which Jesus happens to say quite clearly, "Don't

swear like that.” But a nation, a city, a state, a community can act in ways that are more or less in alignment with the reign of God.

So, when you and I find ourselves living in a place where fear of foreigners and suspicion of people of other races and religions is alive and actually being whipped up and encouraged, it’s not that Jesus says, “Well, that’s to be expected. Cities and nations don’t usually act like Christian communities.” That’s not what he said to the seventy. He said, “Watch out. Shake the dust from your feet. Maybe just leave, because I can’t have you contaminated by the values of a culture like that.” It’s not that it’s insufficiently Christian or just imperfectly Christian. Suspicion and exclusion of the alien and the foreigner and the outsider is actively anti-Christian. It is directly opposed to the reign of God.

More locally, I think it means that if you’re a church in downtown Memphis, Jesus doesn’t care if we carry shiny crosses and have prayer books in the pews if we look at people who don’t seem to possess anything, people who don’t look like us or talk like us or who didn’t go to the same schools as we did ... if we’re not a place of openness and welcome to precisely these, we’re simply not an outpost of the kingdom of God, no matter what we say we believe.

But the good news is this. Jesus said the reign of God really is alive in the world whether we know it or not. Which means it’s alive in downtown Memphis, ripe and ready for harvest. All we have to do to experience it is open ourselves curiously to the next empty handed strangers who show up at our doors. And when we do, what Jesus says is not that we’ll get credit for being good Christians. No. He says that the people we welcome in, who seem to have nothing of value to offer us, end up being the bearers of healing. We’ll be cured of our sicknesses by them. That’s what the story says, isn’t it?

So, Calvary, let’s continue to explore what it means to be a community of welcome like Jesus set seventy disciples on the road one day to find. Let’s open ourselves more fully to the ripeness of what God has planted in the world around us. It might involve — you knew I was going to say it — shaping our buildings and our block into even more inviting and open places where these sacred encounters can more readily take place. It might involve ongoing discernment in our community ministries to ensure that we’re not just providing what we think people need, but are opening ourselves to be changed by the people who come to Calvary without shoes or purses like the ones Jesus sent out.

But maybe the reign of God springs into view just as surely when a grown up agrees to teach Godly Play and is astonished to find that it’s the kids who have led her into new understandings of God, as a vestry member told on Tuesday night. Or maybe it becomes visible when someone bearing a chalice at communion thinks he’s the one ministering until he looks down the line of people with open, empty hands who have brought their griefs, their joys, their ordinary and miraculous stories along with them to the rail and suddenly he’s choking back tears to tell them that the blood of Christ is what’s in the cup. In fact, the reign of God may spring a little more into view every time one person looks over at another one, not wondering what she has to offer or how he might be of use, but looks at them as the miracle they are just by existing in this glorious, hurting, strange, beautiful, bountiful harvest of a world that Jesus wants us to see for the miracle it is.