

RETURNING WITH JOY

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Text: 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."

If you ever went to church camp when you were a kid, you probably came home singing that song "Joy In My Heart," the one that goes,

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy
Down in my heart (where?)
Down in my heart (where?)
Down in my heart

It's a great song to sing around a campfire while you're roasting marshmallows. But is that all it is—just a fun little tune for tikes? Or could it be something more? Could it

be a song that helps children begin to understand the feeling we hear about in the gospel this morning—the feeling of joy that comes from following Jesus? I'll leave that up to you to decide while we take a look at this reading.

This is the story of Jesus appointing seventy disciples to go from town to town, curing the sick and proclaiming the kingdom of God. And I'm sure they start out with a lot of enthusiasm, and probably also some nervousness, and I would imagine even a little fear. After all, they have no idea what to expect. They have no idea what's out there waiting for them. But by the time they return, all their uncertainty is gone, and they're filled with joy, telling Jesus, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" They can hardly believe what they were able to accomplish. They're practically glowing.

Now, I don't know about anyone else, but I've always wanted to feel that kind of joy in my own life of faith. I've always wanted to have that glow, even just a little. But it's hard. My sense of call to ordained ministry was never as clear-cut as it is in this story. The clouds never parted, and Jesus never came down and told me step-by-step what to do. I had to fumble my way along and figure it out as I went, hoping that little tug I felt in my heart was real and not imagined.

For years, I wrestled with self-doubt and this nagging little voice that kept telling me I should quit and do something normal. And there were plenty of times when I almost listened to that voice. But somehow I just kept going—seminary, and then my first church, and then my second, and now here I am at my fourth. And I couldn't tell you when exactly it happened, but somewhere along the line my sense of call was confirmed, and I started feeling like this really is who I am, and this really is where God wants me to be.

Not that I don't still have moments of doubt, but they don't threaten to overwhelm me like they used to, and I can honestly say I do feel joy in doing what I do. Not a jumping up and down kind of joy, but the quiet joy that comes from giving yourself over to something bigger than yourself.

So I guess I can't complain about the path I took. It got me here eventually. But I do think maybe I could've saved myself some grief if I had thought a little more about the instructions Jesus gives the seventy before they head out into the world. He's gives them a list of dos and don'ts that we can still learn a lot from today.

But first he gives them a warning. He tells them he's sending them out "like lambs into the midst of wolves." Which isn't much of a sales pitch, but a sales pitch isn't what they need right now. What they need is the truth. And the truth is, the world can be a rough place. Not everyone they meet is going to welcome them with open arms. They're going to run into resistance, they're going to have doors slammed in their

faces, or worse, and it's going to take a lot of resilience and determination to get through it.

Which is just as true today as it was back then. We live in a world that seems like it's getting angrier and more divided every day. We politicize everything, including God, and we don't trust anyone who isn't telling us what we want to hear. In a world like that it's hard to get through to anybody, and it doesn't take very long to get discouraged.

That with that out of the way, Jesus gives the seventy their marching orders. First he tells them not to bring any money or provisions or even a pair of sandals, but instead to rely on the hospitality of strangers. And if someone welcomes them into their home, they should eat whatever is put in front of them, which might mean having to break the Jewish dietary laws. And instead of being in a big hurry to move on to the next house, they should stick around for a while, even if that slows them down. And when they inevitably come to a town where the people don't want anything to do with them, they should wipe the dust of that place from their feet in peaceful protest and move on.

Now, at first glance, that might seem like a strange and arbitrary and even counter-productive set of rules. If you're sending your disciples out into hostile territory to spread the gospel, wouldn't you want them to be well-equipped and well-prepared, like the Boy Scouts? Wouldn't you want them to move around a lot so they could reach more people? Wouldn't you want them to try a little harder when they run into folks who aren't receptive, instead of giving up at the first sign of rejection?

It doesn't make any sense—unless the way you want your disciples to spread the gospel is by embodying the gospel, and then every one of these rules makes perfect sense. The gospel is about showing strength in weakness; it's about making ourselves vulnerable for the sake of love; it's about being in relationship and prioritizing people over laws and traditions; it's about being a peacemaker; it's about trusting in a reality beyond what we see in front of us every day.

So I think the mission of the seventy is as much about them as it is about the people they're going out to evangelize. I think it's about their spiritual formation. Jesus is sending them into the world, at least in part, to show them what God's kingdom looks like and to teach them how to live in it together.

And when they return, all excited, Jesus gives them one last instruction. He tells them they shouldn't rejoice about the things they were able to accomplish but rejoice instead that their names "are written in heaven." That's the kind of joy they should have in their hearts—not a jumping up and down kind of joy, but a quiet joy—a joy that comes from letting go of their egos and discovering a larger purpose; a joy that comes from being connected to something outside of themselves.

So I'm afraid we don't have any marshmallows, but let's go ahead and sing "Joy In My Heart" anyway because I think this is a good song for helping, not only children, but anyone understand the feeling we hear about in the gospel this morning. But let's make one little change. Let's make it plural instead of singular. Let's make it, "we've got the joy" instead of "I've got the joy." Because this is a feeling we all share together.

**We've got the joy, joy, joy, joy
Down in our hearts (where?)
Down in our hearts (where?)
Down in our hearts.
We've got the joy, joy, joy, joy
Down in our hearts (where?)
Down in our hearts to stay.**

Amen.