

Be the Sheep

A Sermon Expositing Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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When you get out there, dear friends, it's going to be like the Capulates and the Montagues! When you come face to face with them it'll be the Hatfields and the McCoys, Frazier and Ali, cats and dogs, Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr! If I told you that I was sending you out there like Persians among the Greeks what would you do to get ready? If you were being sent out like sheep among the wolves, how would you prepare yourself?

Maybe this is confessional on my part alone, but I don't think it is: images of natural enemies – especially ones in a higher or lower predatory position – kind of get me riled up inside. If you're sending me anywhere for any reason and I know that when I get there I'm going to be face to face with an enemy of mine, I'm not only thinking about what I might do, I'm thinking about what *they* might do.

I once encountered my bitterest of enemies on a hiking trail. I saw it slithering across the path up ahead of me and down into the shrubbery at trailside. My heart lept and started pounding. It was out of sight, so I could just walk on by, but I started thinking about what my *enemy* might be planning; what it might do when I came up next to it. Clearly the vilest creature on God's otherwise good earth was hiding in the shrubs waiting to strike at my heel when I walked by. That thought gave me chills, so I considered turning back to the trailhead and calling it a day. I couldn't stand the thought of the whole day being a waste, of me not getting to the summit just because a slithering evil-doer had poor intentions for me. So, I decided, I would carry on, but I wouldn't just walk right by and walk right into the trap. So I walked carefully up near the place where it was doubtless lying in wait and I took off my day pack and *tossed* it down the trail, then I backed up and *ran* as fast as I could and just before the place where I knew I would be struck dead by that venomous monster I left with everything I had. You've seen the logo on Air Jordans haven't you? That's not *exactly* what I looked like, but it's what I *felt* like. I picked up my pack and glanced back right where my enemy was waiting and as it happens. It wasn't even there. To this day, I'm grateful that nobody saw me do that. Gearing up for encounters with our enemies, sometimes – often – makes us look a bit foolish.

That same thing happens in faith as well. Dear friends, you may have noticed, a great number of our siblings in faith in our place and time have heard the words of Jesus, that he is sending us out as sheep among wolves and are getting ready for the fight, they're preparing for survival.

On this very weekend, the nation in which this congregation finds its home, where most if not all of us find our earthly citizenship celebrates the various ways that liberty has been conceived in this land. One of, if not *the* original and most foundational freedoms born here is that of religious liberty. The grand idea is that a civil government should not establish, push, or favor any religion over another. That's the only real way that non-coercive religion can flourish. It gets confusing at times, I know, the fact that people of faith would *want* a secular government, but that's the soil from which authentic faith can grow. But the narrative that Christianity is being oppressed has become wide spread enough and enough within our populace have heard in that narrative the footsteps of the wolves creeping in, that our political and judicial system has taken up the cause of

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

protecting Christianity – and that tacitly or explicitly to the exclusion of other religions. When we think we’re heading into conflict with our enemies, we tend to prepare and do things that make us look a little foolish.

We get protective and start to think that whatever weapons we can get our hands on are necessary, we arm up metaphorically, emotionally, politically, and literally. And when we feel our weapons of whatever kind are being threatened, we protect those too in the name of Jesus. And when our ideas are being threatened, we protect those too. Friends, I know that we will have in our family of faith, people who feel very differently about what I need to point out to you next, but it isn’t your personal beliefs on the matter that I want us to consider. Some of us in this world, in this faith, in this *congregation* place the wellbeing of the unborn ahead of the wellbeing of the woman carrying it, and some in this world, in this faith, in this *congregation* feel just the opposite. Believe you me, I have opinions on the matter and I feel passionately about them. I’ll even tell you about them if you ask me in some other setting, but what is of importance in this context is that so many in our time have found in the decisions of others – the gut wrenching, complicated, existential decisions of others – a threat to their own way of life. So many have found that threat that for many women and families, that complicated, deeply religious decision is no longer theirs. When we think the enemy is coming, we sometimes do things that make us look foolish.

I know the things I’ve mentioned here are matters of broad policy and not necessarily of any of our direct choosing and so they may seem irrelevant to our purposes this morning. But dear friends, we individuals have enormous power in this world to shift and change the way that life plays out for everyone around us and the things I’ve mentioned just now – by the numbers – are things that have arisen from millions upon millions of Christians who are invariably *afraid* of losing rights, of losing voice, of living in a world not of their making. Whether it is true of you individually or not, beloved, we Christians on the whole are convinced that we are being sent out to the wolves and we’re gearing up for the fight.

But what if that’s not what Jesus meant? What if the intent of his statement to those he sent out to be stewards of good news wasn’t to get them ready for a fight, what if it wasn’t to get them *ready* at all!? In our world, that sounds ludicrous. I don’t like to leave my house without a water bottle and phone charger in case I’m not near power or running water for a while and I’m never away from running water and power! Why wouldn’t you get ready if your mission is the redemption of people and communities? To be going out into the wide world without being prepared would put you in a seriously vulnerable position! But then again, maybe that’s the point.

When Jesus sent these seventy out as emissaries of his redemptive mission he, in fact, told them in careful detail not simply and passively to not prepare, but to be proactively, intentionally unprepared to fend for themselves. Carry no bag or purse or sandals. When you arrive, find someone to show you hospitality and live on what they’re able and willing to give you. Don’t go moving about from house to house based on who has the best offer. Hunker down and live on whatever comes your way. And bless those who support you in whatever way they can. You would think, if Jesus were sending his disciples into a conflict he would send them with provisions and protection and all the wares they would need to make it through the elements and the onslaught and to survive the incoming attacks. But Jesus’s plan requires something else of his disciples – a level of vulnerability that requires them not to try to survive those they encounter and not to subdue those they encounter, but subsist on the goodness of those they encounter, to rely on them. His plan calls for vulnerability. His plan calls for them not to be kings of the kingdom, but to be good guests.

That’s how Jesus seems to see his place and that of those who followed in his calling – guests. Even when they return from their mission amazed at the power they’ve been given he tells them not to be so giddy about their ability to manipulate things in this world, but to give thanks that they are citizens of another world. They’re guests in this one and Jesus wants them, wants us, to be good and grateful guests. Redemptive – yes, but not by our power of manipulation or by our power of force but by our vulnerability. For once Jesus isn’t *describing* when he says sheep amid wolves, he’s *prescribing*. Yes, this world is dissonant with the Kingdom of God, yes we belong to another world, so yes sometimes the things we experience will be harsh in our eyes – be the sheep in the equation. In fact, the harshest thing that Jesus told his followers to do is in response to a town

that would not show them hospitality and that was to dust their feet off, but still be sure you let them know the good news of God is right here right now.

Friends there is a lot going on in the world that isn't right or just or equitable. And make no mistake, we have a responsibility as people of faith to do our part to see those things made right, but in these moments of deep, maddening and growing injustice and inequity – even in the name of God – we do well to heed the call of Jesus. Let vulnerability be our strength. Let our voice be loud and clear and certain, but let it be kind and caring of all. Let us not borrow tactics as if we are sheep trying to be wolves, but rather let our peace bring redemption. And if all this seems foolhardy, as if peace cannot possibly match up with the violence of this world, as if vulnerability cannot bring about redemption, then join me at the table in remembrance of the one who met the violence of empire with vulnerability.

Amen.