

“We Stand On Guard for Thee”

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Every Tuesday morning, my alarm goes off at an hour I didn’t even know existed so that I can attend the breakfast meeting of the Rotary Club of Festival City – Stratford. At the beginning of each meeting, we stand and join in singing “O Canada” (at times I’m even invited to lead the singing of the National Anthem). Of course, this song has been in the headlines lately over the controversial proposal to change the line “true patriot love in all thy sons command” to “true patriot love in all of us command.” The debate that is raging proves how important this anthem remains for Canadians, and how even changing a few words is taken very seriously.

No matter where you stand on this proposal, one change that no one would contemplate is changing the plural character of “O Canada”:

- “Our home and native land”
- “With glowing hearts we see thee rise”
- “We stand on guard for thee.”

No one would ever think of singing “I” or “me” because we sing of what we share: a “commonwealth,” where the good of any individual is inextricably linked to the good of the whole. It is the anthem of a nation, of a land we share with everyone who calls Canada home.

As we sing of the “true patriot love” we share on this Canada Day weekend, we also sing this morning of the calling that gathers us together as the people of God. We gather as a people who have been united in Holy Baptism, in which we are *“reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the Body of Christ.”* The former means of identification that defined us are no longer relevant; for *“there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:28). Our unity in Christ means that *“our commonwealth is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”* (Philippians 3:20). As we gather as God’s people in worship, the words we use in song and in prayers are in the plural, words that unite us and speak as one voice; after all, no one would dream of praying “My Father” any more than we would sing “my home and native land” on Tuesday mornings.

The unity that is ours in Jesus Christ, that which binds us together *“with cords that cannot be broken,”* can be witnessed in this morning’s Gospel lesson, in which Jesus *“appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.”* (Luke 10:1). The commissioning of this larger group of followers, which is unique to Luke’s Gospel, conveys a sense of growth and movement. The commissioning foreshadows the mission of the early church and establishes the pattern for those who are sent out. The number “seventy” (in some editions the number is 72) may recall Moses’ appointment of seventy elders to help him (*“So the LORD said to Moses, ‘Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you.’”* – Numbers 11:16). It may also be related to the number of nations listed in Genesis 10, so that the commissioning foreshadows the mission of the early church and establishes the pattern for those who are sent out.

It is significant that when Jesus appoints the Seventy, he does not send them out individually but in pairs. According to Mosaic Law, two witnesses are required for a testimony to be credible (*"A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence that is committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained."* – Deuteronomy 19:15). For this reason, and also because of the rigors of travel in the ancient world, the practice of apostles working in pairs is evident in the ministry of apostles who worked together (Peter and John, Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Silas). Those whom the Lord has appointed are sent out in pairs *"ahead of him"* to prepare the way for Jesus in each of the villages *"where he himself intended to go."*

Jesus' commissioning of the Seventy begins with his use of a common metaphor from the Old Testament of the harvest as God's gathering of God's people in the last times:

- "Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great." – Joel 3:13.
- "Now many nations are assembled against you, saying, 'Let her be profaned, and let our eyes gaze upon Zion.' But they do not know the thoughts of the LORD; they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor. Arise and thresh, O daughter Zion, for I will make your horn iron and your hoofs bronze; you shall beat in pieces many peoples, and shall devote their gain to the LORD, their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth." – Micah 4:11-13.

Following the parable of the sower (Luke 8:4-8), it is now time to gather in the harvest from the seed that *"fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold."* But harvest season is also a time of great urgency; which is why the fact that *"the laborers are few"* constitutes a crisis that requires the people to *"ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest,"* including those who are being commissioned for this task.

Jesus' commissioning of these laborers in the harvest that is the mission of the church comes with a warning that *"I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves."* (10:3). The wolf was the natural predator of the lamb, and is used by Jesus as a metaphor to warn these disciples of the opposition they will encounter. As many have resisted his message and rejected him, Jesus knows that those who are sent in his name will face the same forces of opposition. In sending these disciples out in pairs, they will be able to support each other in a way that would not be possible if they were to face the wolves by themselves:

- "Thus, when one falters, the other can help. When one is lost, the other can seek the way. When one is discouraged, the other can hold faith for both for a while. That's what the company of believers does – we hold on to each other, console each other, encourage and embolden each other, and even believe for each other." – David Lose.

The instructions to the Seventy parallel Jesus' earlier instructions to the Twelve, when our Lord *"called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal."* (9:1-2). In addition to traveling lightly, carrying *"no purse, no bag, no sandals,"* the disciples are also instructed to *"greet no one on the road,"* which underscores the need for urgency and singleness of purpose (*"Let them be like grass on the housetops that withers before it grows up, with which reapers do not fill their hands or binders of sheaves their arms, while those who pass by do not say, 'The blessing of the LORD be upon you! We bless you in the name of the LORD!'"* – Psalm 129:6-8).

When the disciples enter a house, they are to share the greeting *"Peace to this house!"* The sharing of peace was a common greeting (*"Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have."* – 1 Samuel 25:6). The response to this greeting will be an indication as to whether *"anyone is there who shares in peace,"* one who is a "child of peace" who share the character and quality of the parent (*"... they are like angels*

and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.” – 20:36). The character of the host is determined by whether the host receives the disciples and their message of the kingdom.

Having gone forth with no provisions, the disciples are instructed to rely entirely upon the hospitality of their hosts, for *“the laborer deserves to be paid”* (10:7; 1 Timothy 5:18). Implicit in this command is the removal of social barriers; Peter and Paul will be received into Gentile homes and will eat with Gentiles as part of the mission of the church. They are also instructed to *“not move about from house to house,”* seeking better quarters or prolonging their stay. When they are welcomed into a town, the disciples are charged with continuing the three facets of Jesus’ work in Galilee: *“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.’”* (10:9). This will mark both the mission of the Seventy as well as the mission of the church, encompassing the creation of community (table fellowship), care of physical needs, and the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom.

As Jesus instructs the Seventy on what they are to do when they are welcomed, he also teaches them how they shall respond when they encounter rejection. Their response to negative receptions is to *“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.’”* (10:10-11), which is a traditional act of repudiation. The rejection of their message does nothing, however, to threaten the truth of their message that *“the kingdom of God has come near.”* *“The basic message is not contingent on the response.”* (Fred Craddock).

Jesus’ final act before sending the Seventy out into the fields of harvest is to confer on them the rights and authorities of a legal agent: *“Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”* (10:16). Hearing means acceptance and obedience; it requires both understanding and doing: *“My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”* (8:21).

Luke does not report on how long the interval was between Jesus’ commissioning of the Seventy and their return, but does share the joy that characterizes the experience of the disciples who have obeyed Jesus’ mission charge: *“The seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’”* (10:17), joy that foreshadows the experience of those who would witness the resurrection (*“And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”* – 24:52-53). The success of the Seventy is epitomized by their power over demons; Jesus interprets this success as a sign that the promise of the end times is being realized: *“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.”* (10:18-19). “Snakes and scorpions” appear as images for the power of evil in prophetic and apocalyptic writings (*“Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given authority like the authority of scorpions of the earth.”* – Revelation 9:3). By casting out demons, the disciples have demonstrated their power over Satan. Vanquishing the enemies of God’s people is another sign of apocalyptic hope (*“... that he would save us from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.”* – 1:71). But as great as was their joy over their triumph over the enemies of God’s people, the higher reason for rejoicing is that the disciples’ names are now written in the book of life: *“But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book.”* (Daniel 12:1).

- “The proper response to the coming of God’s kingdom is joy, not only for the defeat of evil and the vanquishing of demonic powers but also for the experience of life rightly ordered in God’s fellowship.”
– Alan Culpepper.

Jesus’ commissioning of the Seventy and his sending them out in pairs into the fields of harvest remind us that none of us is called as a solitary follower of Jesus Christ; we are baptized into a community of the faithful that is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. No person, no congregation stands alone, witnesses alone, or serves alone; we are called into a unity with one another that is rooted in our unity with Christ who is one with the Father. As no Canadian would sing of *“my home and native land,”* no Christian prays that God will *“give me this day my daily bread,”* nor would we refer to the calling of Christ as *“my calling”* but rather *“our*

calling.” As Christ shared his mission with his disciples, in Christ *“we all are one in mission, we all are one in call ... a single great commission compels us from above to plan and work together that all may know Christ’s love.”* (ELW Hymn 576).

In her address to our recent Eastern Synod Assembly, National Bishop Susan Johnson reminded us of the unity we share in Christ, and how Lutherans across Canada and around the world are called to share in the mission into which Christ has called us to work together so that we might experience the joy that is ours when we work together as God’s chosen people:

- “I love our church, and I’m proud of the ministry we do. I know that the impact of our ministry together is greater than the sum of our separate parts. We may have fewer members and financial resources than when our church was formed back in 1986 but from what I observed at our National Convention last summer and from what I have seen and heard from synods, congregations, and ministries across this church – there is a new and exciting spirit within our church. We are becoming a mission-focused church. We are becoming more spiritually grounded and vibrant. We are united in common vision and aims. And we are learning how to respect and even rejoice in regional differences we experience throughout the church.”

Notice the language that Bishop Johnson uses; she never refers to the ELCIC as “my church” or speaks strictly of her own ministry. It is *our* church, and *we* have been called together by Christ to work and serve together so that all may know Christ’s love.

- “Because when we work together, when we recall that God said it is not good for us to be alone, when we see our hope and welfare as inextricably linked to that of those around us, then we not only can accomplish so much more than we possibly could alone, but we also discover that our names, along with those first disciples, are written in the book of heaven.” – David Lose.

As I join with my fellow Rotarians in singing “O Canada” every Tuesday morning, the day may come when the words of our National Anthem are slightly changed. But what will never change is that we will sing as one of the unity that is ours as a nation; for our song is our pledge that *“we stand on guard for thee.”* As a people who gather on Sunday mornings to sing our praises to God, our song reflects our unity that “a mighty fortress is *our* God,” who is “*our* shelter from the stormy blast and *our* eternal home.” God has called us together to be the Church, the living stones who have been called together “*to proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” It is not my calling; it is not your calling – it is *our* calling! Amen.