

Apostles of Peace and Hope
based on Luke 10:1-12, David Jahnke, 10/23/16

The two most important narratives of the Jewish people involve exile, captivity, liberation through anointed leaders, at least in part, and return from exile. The most important is the Exodus from Egypt, after being enslaved by Pharaoh. Moses came and performed signs and wonders and then he led the people of God to the promised land.

Hundreds of years later, they are exiled again, this time to Babylon. After decades of exile, prophets of hope said to the people that their sins had been paid for. That God was going to forgive them and free them and send them home. And after seventy years, they are freed by an anointed Gentile King Cyrus-- and the word used to describe him is Meshiyach, Messiah.

These narratives pervade the Hebrew scriptures and the Hebrew mindset. So in Jesus day, even though they are no longer held captive in a foreign country, there was still a sense of being in exile because they were under Roman rule. And there was a deep longing and hope for another Moses who could perform signs and wonders like Moses did and set the people free; or another Messiah like Cyrus whose liberation would be proof of God's love for the Hebrews and His power and forgiveness.

This is the world that Jesus was born into. He knew these stories well, as most everyone did. He himself had been exiled to Egypt where he lived as a refugee. He came back and gradually came to realize as he was growing up that he had unusual powers. When he started to use these powers during his public ministry-- signs and wonders just like Moses-- the hope of the Jewish people started to come alive and people started to follow him.

A large part of both his teaching and his prophetic activity involved the forgiveness of sins, which was an essential part of the Hebrew story. But instead of God forgiving sins, Jesus himself forgave sinners. Wherever he went, he broke bread and had fellowship with the unclean making clear that they were worthy of inclusion and fellowship. He even empowered his followers to forgive, sending them out with his message that God's Kingdom was coming near as was God's Messiah-King so it was time to repent and receive the forgiveness that was being offered. And throughout all of this, Jesus and the disciples were healing people and lives were being transformed. Everyone knew that something very big was happening.

I do not think we are so very different from these oppressed but hopeful Jewish people. We do not live under foreign oppressors but we still see oppression all around us. We see bombs being dropped on children in Aleppo and the scourge of drugs ravishing the state of New Hampshire just north of us. We feel the weight of sin and judgment within our homes and within ourselves. And we just long for things to be made right and to be freed from the weight of wrongdoing through forgiveness and restoration.

And thank God apostles and teachers have come to us over the years with news of God's Kingdom forgiveness and restoration in Jesus. Thank God the Spirit of Jesus followed in their footsteps and confirmed that forgiveness is a reality and new life a potentiality every morning.

I know you all have heard this news. I pray you have believed it. And I am sure you have felt the power of forgiveness alive in your life, cleaning the slate for you personally and restoring your relationships. The Kingdom of God has come to you and transformed your life. Can I get an Amen? Reverend Ken?

Now if this is true for you, next comes the hard part. Because it means you too are sent out just as these seventy men and women were to proclaim Kingdom forgiveness with both our words and our deeds. Just for clarity's sake, our message is not, "Get your act and your beliefs together and then maybe God and his people will help." The message is "You are forgiven and loved by God who is with you, period. He wants to fill you with new life." And we do our best to be the very presence of God to them and grant them signs of new life.

I saw this alive on Wednesday night as a group of well-to-do teenagers chose to give 3 and a half hours to proclaiming the love and mercy of God to the lost and downtrodden in Elizabeth. It was a beautiful thing to behold. We will go again on Nov. 16th if you would like to join us. We could use drivers. If you cannot wait until then, Liz, Dee and Carol go every week. And we also need someone to deliver meals to Elizabeth today or next Sunday.

These missions prepare people for the final harvest; it waters the seed of the Spirit in them and stirs them to bear fruit so that they might have something to bring to the final harvest. And more importantly, because they have seen and received love and mercy from us, they have practiced doing so and will thus be better prepared to receive the love and mercy God wants to pour out upon them on that day.

A gentleman I served the other night confessed to having been lost in addiction. I was able to confess my own struggles and bring hope of new life. The whole time, he was so kind and grateful and complementary. So this mission brought hope and affirmed the seed of God in him and led him to bear fruit to me as much as I was to him.

So we have this mission here in Union County. We have an international mission coming to our state as well. I could not help but go here with the importance of hospitality in our passage today. We have to welcome international children of God in need of shelter, hospitality and care, just like the disciples were. Peace was the greeting of the disciples and it is literally the Word that homeless and possession-less middle eastern families are greeting the world with. We should receive their peace and provide the care God demands.

What an opportunity Christians have to make known the incredible love of God to Muslims who have an incomplete picture of it! Do we not want to send them home when all of this is done with good news that the West is not the Great Satan their fundamentalist brethren claim we are? Might all of this not be a part of God's overall plan to reform Islam and further the peace and reconciliation of all peoples?

Is there a risk in welcoming refugees? Of course there is. Just as there is in going and working with addicted and mentally ill people in Elizabeth. Love and mercy always involve risk. So we do all that we can to reduce the relatively minor risks and proceed with carrying out the will of God.

A collection of church groups calling themselves RAP-- Refugee Assistance Partnership-- is working together with Church World Service to welcome refugees. I have been to a meeting but I would appreciate someone else taking the lead if so moved. Let me know if you are interested.

Now I can imagine that those who saw the ragged pairs of disciples may have had a hard time believing their message, at least at first. They had to show them hospitality according to God's Law but they did not have to believe everything they said. Not only did they have this radical message but think about how they looked without any bags, purses, money, food or possessions. I saw a billboard the other day that may reflect their good Jewish hosts feelings. It said God expects Spiritual fruits, not religious nuts.

The disciples mission and message may have seemed a bit nutty as it may still today but it was all about bearing fruit and stirring others to do so as well. Jesus followed in their footsteps but some did not even believe him. But the humility of Jesus' way of reaching out to the sick and the downtrodden made an impression-- and it pointed people to the ultimate purpose of the entire mission-- Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection. And within a few decades, this mission and message were spreading like wildfire across Israel and the Mediterranean due largely to the way they loved each other and their neighbors.

People today will have their doubts. But their spirits will also be moved by our willingness to serve the lowly among us. And whether in a few years or a few decades, any and all of their doubts can be driven out when they meet Jesus face to face and the Kingdom is fully revealed. Until that day, may our love and service give them glimpses into the Kingdom and help prepare them for the final harvest...