

Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois
July 7, 2013

Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
Text- Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

What would we have thought? As we planned mission trips—to Kenya, to Guatemala, even to rural areas of the U.S., what would we have thought if we were told:

- Do not go to REI or to Dick's Sporting Goods.
- Do not buy mosquito netting or that new pair of Merrill walking shoes. Do not stock up on extra-strength insect repellent, energy bars, or that liquid soap that serves as shampoo and to hand-wash your undies. Definitely no power converters or solar chargers for electronic devices.

What would we have thought if we were told:

- Do not go to your storage locker to find your sleep sheet, your inner and outer layers, your Woolrich hiking socks.
- Do not go to the travel medicine clinic for inoculations and anti-malaria medicine.
- Do not even go to the bank to exchange money.

Simply put your passport in a zip-lock bag and keep it in your pocket.

Well, of course, we did all of those things—REI (several trips), the storage locker, the travel clinic. And we did even more. For the Kenya trip in particular, we prepared as a group with several mandatory evening meetings:

- People who had been to Kenya before came to brief us on the political and social situation, to tell stories of what it is like “on the ground,” and to coach us on cultural sensitivity.
- We had a session to reflect on our purpose for going: not to “help those poor, unfortunate folk” or to impose our ways, our solutions but to walk together, to listen to the stories and build relationships, to learn; and certainly not to “convert” them—indeed, their faith and practices put us to shame!
- Finally, we had a hands-on demonstration of suitcase packing along with tips on where to buy quick-drying underwear and how to assemble personal hygiene kits were we to be in areas without plumbing.

It makes me wonder—without all of our “stuff” would we be so eager to go? Would we be willing to go with the instructions that Jesus’ 70 followers received?

These 70, selected by Jesus from his many followers were the ones who ready to go. They were not the ones who needed to return home to bury a parent or to bring in the harvest. They were not the ones who could not let go of their wealth. These 70 were ready to drop everything and go.

Times were different then, of course. There was a keen sense of urgency in Jesus’ commissioning: he had turned his face to Jerusalem. These 70 would go before him to proclaim the coming of the kingdom in the same places his own circuitous path would take him on his last journey. The journey that would end with his crucifixion and death. So their preparation was not about packing lists or the cultural vagaries of each town they would visit. Their fears and anxieties were more immediate: their message would not be universally welcomed. They would face resistance, rejection, possibly even violence. And they would be fully dependent on others’ good will and hospitality. Despite any fears and anxiety they may have had—and I’m sure they had them—Jesus’ message would get out. Whatever the rejection, there would be those who heard, those who would continue to spread the word. Otherwise, I doubt that we would be here today listening to this story.

We don’t feel that urgency today, do we? We don’t willingly go outside of our red doors to proclaim the kingdom. We share some of the fears of those 70 followers—fears of rejection, fears of resistance. But I’m guessing we have another one—fear of the “e” word, “evangelism.” We don’t want to be mistaken for those zealots who go from door to door with their religious tracts claiming to possess a single Truth (with a capital “T”) that everyone needs to accept.

And, I expect, we have a fear of dependence—on the vulnerability of needing to depend on others, on their hospitality. There’s no way we could troop out of here this afternoon, even just for a few days, without being equipped with our stuff. I’m sure I couldn’t.

The church has become comfortable. Oh, we offer hospitality. We welcome people into our doors. Maybe we even get bold and invite others from time to time. But this is about a different kind of hospitality—a hospitality that Jesus turned on its head. It’s not so much about our welcoming but about opening ourselves to others—to their ways, their customs—allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and receive their gifts. This is more

than inviting people to join our group, to be like us. It is being incomplete without one another, without all of our diverse stories and talents and needs. It's about a hospitality beyond the doors.

Perhaps we need more urgency. With all of the talk of decline in our churches, growing numbers who have no connection with religious communities ("nones," the "spiritual but not religious") we find something else to fear—their indifference. What message do we proclaim that is compelling? Do we even proclaim one?

If you follow the Episcopal News Service online, you may know that there is a Joint Assembly taking place in Canada between the Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. They are looking at possibilities for full communion like that between the Episcopal Church and the ELCA here in the United States. In fact, there are talks amongst all four bodies about closer relationships. Our Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts-Schori is there as is ELCA bishop Mark Hanson. The theme of the assembly is mission, and a keynote speaker, a professor at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, urged those gathered "to revisit the fundamental reason for being a church in the world. Mission is the church's *raison d'être* or reason for existence, he said; it is not simply a function of the church. 'Start with a mission and the church will be found.'" (ENS)

Did you hear that? The fundamental reason for being a church. Mission is not a function, not a program or a committee. Mission is the church's very reason for existence.

Our Presiding Bishop said in her address:

Mission is about going into the world – together, at least two by two – to love, heal, and reconcile what is injured and broken. We are sent out of ourselves, out of our churches and worshipping communities, to be broken open for the healing of the world.

Were the people we met in Kenya changed or transformed by our visit? I can't speak for them, but the faces of the two teenage computer students who learned how to create a simple spreadsheet that can be used in managing the finances of their organization may have spoken to that. What I do know is that we were changed. In spite of all our "stuff," we had to become vulnerable. We learned to accept the abundant hospitality we were offered—from the dancing and singing women and children who met our van, to the precious warm water to wash our hands, to the cold drinks and ground nuts to tide us over until lunch, we were cared for. But it was in the sharing of stories, the struggles

and small successes, the joys and the sorrows, that we came to embrace a kinship that surpassed race and ethnicity or national borders. A kinship that is lasting.

My favorite quote from the Joint Assembly in Canada comes from Bishop Hanson's address:

The question before us these days is 'What shall be the face of Christianity in North America in the next 10 years? Shall it be an increasingly vanishing face? Or shall it be the face of a cairn? A cairn, he explained, is a gathering of stones scattered but then piled up, and a cairn can have two functions. It can be a monument, a memorial to the past or it can be a pointing of the way.

The 70 that Jesus sent out went without possessions. "Traveling light" helped them remain single-minded and focused. How often we, and our churches, get distracted by all of the details of maintaining an institution and providing programs, forgetting what we are really about. The mission of the church is to continue Jesus' work, not being caught up in our own priorities and preferences. It is about simplicity. It is about focus on what is truly important. It is about being authentic and willing to talk about our faith—and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. And willing to listen to the stories of others. It is about having the courage to risk being rejected and being able to pick ourselves up and move on to others who do want to hear. For they are out there, people who are yearning to make meaning out of the confusion and chaos of life, people who are looking for a deeper, fuller conversation about faith. It is to be a cairn that points the way. And we have that gift to offer. Thanks be to God.

Amen.