

“Today is . . .” *

Psalm 118:24; Luke 10:1-20

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 4) 2021

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Today is the Fourth of July, and today is the Lord’s Day.

Preacher and teacher Tom Long has reminded me that it happens like this every few years, when the American national holiday lands on a Sunday, the day of sacred worship; when the aroma of hamburgers and hot dogs sizzling on a summer grill blends with the fragrance of bread and grape juice on the Table of the Lord, when the sound of fireworks merges with the tones and notes of hymns and prayers.

For many congregations, of course, this all fits together nicely and comfortably. The red, white, and blue bunting is happily hung throughout the sanctuary of the Lord. The cross gets wrapped in the flag.

But for other Christians, Sunday and American Independence Day lie together less easily. We are among those who feel the discomfort. We know that the Cross and the Flag are both demanding symbols, which call forth our deepest affection and devotion. We love them both and respect them both, but we also know that you cannot give your deepest devotion to two different things. One must be subservient to the other. This coming together of the Lord’s Day and the Nation’s Day makes visible on the calendar the decision we Christians face every day as Joshua said long ago, “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24: 15).

Now we know that much of the time this choice is not put so starkly. Everyone is from somewhere, of course, and part of the pride in being an American is merely the gentle pleasure of being in and from this place, having this history, and enjoying the rights and benefits of this place. There is much that is good when we put our hands over our hearts and sing the national anthem and hang the red, white, and blue.

But we live in a time when the Cross and the Flag get all intertwined. When some of the most zealous voices for American power and expansion come from the sanctuaries of the Lord; when patriotism and faith get so mixed up that both are perverted and become aggressive nationalism and hate-filled religion.

In times like these, and on days like this, we cannot avoid the tensions that come from being a citizen of a superpower, and being a disciple of Prince of Peace, between our love of this land and people and our commitment to Jesus Christ.

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The lectionary is, of course, oblivious to this collision of calendars. As far as the lectionary is concerned this is simply the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, another Sunday in Ordinary Time, and just one more Sunday between Pentecost and Advent. Today, the lectionary has us telling Mark's version of Jesus sending out missionaries. I'm going to depart from the lectionary a bit, and tell the same story from Luke's perspective, which fleshes things out a bit more.

If America sees itself as a nation with a global mission and if the leaders of the country issue orders accordingly, our reading from the Gospel of Luke reminds us that Jesus, too, has a world-wide mission – a quite different mission – and that the followers of Jesus are also under orders – quite different orders.

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The passage from Luke tells us that Jesus sent out seventy missionaries in pairs. Their job was to pave the way for Jesus and go "to every town and place where he himself intended to go" (10:1). And where is that? Where is it that Jesus intends to go? Everywhere: Jesus intends to go everywhere, to every nation and every tribe. The risen Christ says later that "repentance and forgiveness is to be proclaimed to all nations" (24:47).

Notice that Jesus did not send them out on their own – as individuals. They were sent out in pairs, two by two. Partly that is to make sure they support one another. More, it is so God supports them through each other. Last week, for example, we talked about the Powers of Sin and Death that is institutional as well as personal. Jesus does not send us out as individual Christians to face such formidable powers. We go out in community, in relationship and the Holy Spirit works in and through us in relationship so we can not only face Sin and Death but by God's power, overcome them. This is not a Lone Ranger operation.

Notice too that there are seventy of these missionaries. The number most likely comes from the fact that Genesis 10 lists seventy nations of the earth. In other words, the seventy represent Jesus' intention to be present to all humanity, and these missionaries are to reach out to the full number of nations, to stop at no border, allow no wall to stop them, to respect no division of race or clan. From the beginning, the mission of Jesus included all peoples and embraced all races and went to all nations.

A friend of mine has served as the long-time pastor of a church in one of the suburbs of Washington D. C. There was an argument in the church about having the American flag in the sanctuary or not. Some members were incensed when it

was proposed that the American flag be moved out of the sanctuary into the narthex, the foyer. The issue was referred to an appropriate committee and then to the congregation for discussion. It came as a shock to some of the veteran members of the church who wanted the American flag in its place of prominence to discover that half of the church came from other nations. There were diplomats and staff members from nations all around the globe and all were committed sisters and brothers in Christ and members of the congregation: Poland, Hong Kong, Albania, Argentina, Nigeria, Thailand, and on and on. Now, when you enter the building and walk through the narthex, you are met with the flags representing the nations of everyone in the church – over fifty of them.

The church of Jesus Christ is for all people and all nations.

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Notice the manner of those going out in the name of Jesus. Jesus says, "Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves . . ." (10:3). "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals . . ." (10:4). In other words, we are to travel light, leaving behind our protection, our defensiveness, our guardedness. Leave our fear and suspicion. Then he goes on to say, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house'" (10:5). Which is not an ancient form of saying, "Hello." It means to pronounce peace and shalom, to embody it, and seek it. It means to bless the household we enter – whoever they are, and whether we like them or agree with them or not. In a world of division, we proclaim peace and shalom, and in a world of bad news we share the good news that Christ brings another way. We are to proclaim and work for peace in a world of violence.

It makes a lot of difference what day this is to you. If you mainly see this as the Fourth of July, then we are concerned with defense, guarding against our

enemies, building walls, and carrying guns. If, however, we are celebrating the Lord's Day, we hear another call. We are told to fear nothing and to head right into the midst of those we thought were our enemies and bring peace. Not hunker down; instead, we go forth.

Two different days; two different missions.

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When the missionaries came back from their journeys to report to Jesus what had happened, they returned with astounding tales of healing, peace, and grace. "Yes," replied Jesus, "while you were doing the work of the gospel, I saw Satan fall like lightning" (10:18). You see, the disciples thought they were doing small deeds of ministry, unnoticed acts of compassion. They thought they were simply obeying Jesus, serving people in need, speaking peace, and proclaiming the Way of the New Creation in Christ. But Jesus says, that in those small acts of grace and mercy and healing, he saw Satan fall like lightning." In other words, those small acts of mercy are what bring evil to its knees.

We tend to see the small things; Jesus sees something big. The big picture.

I'm like you. Later today and tomorrow many of us will enjoy a time of celebration and fun. We'll eat hamburgers and hotdogs, sit in lawn chairs, and watch the fireworks while the children play and run and enjoy the Fourth of July.

But know this. We are also baptized and have orders from the Lord of all Lords. We are called. And when we are called, we take a deep breath (breathing in the Holy Spirit) and head out to places we never imagined in the name of Christ. We will be sent to visit a friend in the hospital, maybe to speak a word of reconciliation at someone's kitchen table, maybe to be a healer in a nursing home,

or maybe take a courageous stand when someone tells a racist or sexist joke. We will serve the hungry, show up at meetings, speak for justice, and love the outcasts. When we are called, we are sent and we will carry with us only one thing, Jesus' gospel of peace. The way will be hard, and it will likely not even be noticed by most. But by the grace of God, it will become part of God's work and will help knock the Powers of Evil off their throne. Satan will fall from the sky like a flash of lightning, and your name will be written in heaven.

It all depends on what day you think this is.

Today is the Fourth of July, and today is the Lord's Day.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.

(*Thanks to Tom Long for the inspiration of this sermon.)