

## Wanted not Needed

### Proper 9, year C - Luke 10:1-12, 16-20

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, July 3, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Right up until the events of this morning's reading from Luke's Gospel, the disciples had played a passive role in their life with Jesus. They had followed Jesus around the countryside, they had listened as he taught, they had been witnesses to his signs and wonders and miracles. Now Jesus gathers seventy of his followers and gives them an *active* role to play in the ministry. They are to go out ahead of him and preach the coming of Good News. They *did* go out. And when they came back, they were filled with stories of the wonderful things that had happened while they were doing God's work.

As Christians, we are, each of us, involved in doing God's work in our own world. In fact, it has often been pointed out that we are essentially God's agents in this world. Whether we talk about ourselves as God's hands and feet, or the working of the Holy Spirit, or the Body of Christ, we understand that we are sent out, commissioned to do *God's* work, just like the seventy in this morning's lesson.

Over the last few years, I have been privileged to see the many ways in which God's work is being done right here at St. Paul's. From packing Christmas boxes for towboat crews and children around the world, to offering cookies and cheese curls, and songs and and service and smiles, to the residents of Henderson Manor, to collecting everything from toilet paper to potted meat for CCO, to setting aside money from our own investments to distribute to others who are doing God's work, to feeding whoever shows up on the hungriest week of summer, great things are happening because of your generosity and your kindness.

People's lives are being changed and people are being brought to understand God's loving presence in their lives. I am privileged to receive on your behalf countless notes of thanks from people whose lives have been touched by the faithfulness of service and the generosity of spirit of members of this congregation. It is obvious that here at St. Paul's, God's work is being done – every day – by human hands, by *your* hands. Though it is perhaps valid, maybe even *obvious*, to say that we *could* be doing *more*, like the disciples returning from their mission, we have every reason to be excited by the wonderful way that God is working in and through this Parish.

But there's a trap waiting in there, too. Listen again to the disciples' excited words on their return: "Lord, in your name even the demons submit... to *us*!" The disciples are careful to say that they have performed these marvelous acts in Christ's name. But they are equally clear of their *own* role in the work.

And there's the trap, a trap that's as old as the story of the first sin – and as up-to-date as yesterday's pat on the back. When we look at the wonderful things that God is doing through our work, and even when we focus on our need to do more, it is far too easy to put *ourselves* at the center of things, to see *ourselves* as somehow indispensable to God's purpose. Regardless of how much we do in Christ's name, regardless how many mouths we feed, or how many backs we clothe, regardless even how many people we tell about his saving love – regardless of how much of God's work is accomplished with our hands, we are wrong to presume... that God *needs* us. There are theologians today, and throughout the history of the Church, for that matter, that work very hard to put humanity at the *center* of God's work. The trap is that when we come to see ourselves as *necessary*, or even central, to what God is about, God is made *dependent*, and dependent upon *us*.

But let me tell you, that kind of dependent God is not the one I read about in Scripture. That kind of God is not the one that has revealed himself to the Church. That kind of God is *certainly* not the one that is worthy of worship. The God that Scripture proclaims is the very center of absolutely everything – and dependent on precisely *nothing*. The God that the Church celebrates *needs*... absolutely *nothing*. Not time nor space. Not good works, nor sacrifices, nor even that ever-elusive contrite heart. Not even you – and *certainly* not me. Even if humanity did not *exist* – even if the whole *world* did not exist, my God would be the same. If all creation ceased to be, or if none of it had *ever* been brought into being in the first place, God would still be the great I AM. As poets and prophets and preachers have said it for hundreds and thousands of years: our God is the same yesterday, today and forever!

So, where does that leave us? Clearly, God *could* accomplish God's own purposes without *our* hands. Yet here we are, having been called to do that very work. God *could* go where our stumbling feet cannot, where our restless feet *will* not. God's voice *could* speak directly to hearts in ways unutterable by our own poor stuttering lips. Yet here we are, commissioned as agents of the eternal Creator. The same God who brought the universe into existence with but a single word, a single note, a single whisper, that same God *could* indeed use some means other than our fragile hands, our halting steps, or our all-too-often *silent* lips to do his work in that universe. Yet here we are, charged to go into all the world, commissioned to preach the Gospel to all people. Here we are, not *needed* by the almighty Lord of all, but *clearly* engaged in the work of that same Lord.

So, I ask again, where does all that leave us? You see, God choosing to send *us* out to do the work of God in a world that falls so far short of God's revealed plan – that points to something far more valuable than God *needing* us. While God may not *need* us, every indication is that God *wants* us very much indeed. The thing is, we are not mere tools in God's hands, to be used as needed and then thrown to the back of the junk drawer. Rather, as strange as it may seem, we are called to *participate* with the Creator of all that is. We are called to *participate* in the Creator's work of redemption and re-creation. God is not only doing something *to* us, or *with* us, or even *through* us while we are doing God's work in the world, God is also doing something *in* us. In calling us to be the hands of Christ, and the feet of Christ, and the voice of Christ – in calling us to *be* the *Body* of Christ, God is calling us to be *part* of who God is. "Rejoice not that the spirits submit to you," Jesus told his disciples, "but *rejoice* that your names are written in heaven."

You see, it *is* important that God's work is being done in and through those of us who gather here to worship and then go out to serve our families, and our community, and our *world* in the name of Christ. It *is* important, so we continue to do the good work that God has given us to do, and we rejoice in the fruit of that work, even as we acknowledge that there is always more to be done. But it is infinitely *more* important that through that work, through our *dependence* on the One who has lived for us, through our *obedience* to the One who has died for us, through our *faithfulness* to the One who has claimed us and called us and commissioned us, we are brought into *relationship* with the One who has *loved* us. We rejoice in the gracious Good News that, through Jesus Christ, our names have been written in heaven. We rejoice in the sure and certain *fact* that the one who created us, the one who has redeemed us, the one who sustains our every breath, *loves* us enough to call us to participate in the work of the universe. We rejoice that we are not mere tools in the hands of the ever-living, never-changing Lord of Creation, but that we are precious daughters and sons, held in our Father's ever-loving heart!

Oh, and one more thing. If that's the way Christ thinks of *us*. Maybe that's the way we should be treating *each other*. Just saying. Maybe write *that* vision!