

Dusting Off Hospitality

Luke 10:1-20

Scott B. Martin – July 8, 2007

The sending out of the 70 two by two is a fairly well known Scripture passage. Typically, the focus falls on the 70 and how they have been given a mission by Jesus to spread the kingdom shalom of God wherever they went. Much is often made of them going from town to town and how some towns will reject them and if they do they are to wipe the dust of that town off their feet and simply move on to the next mission field. When one places the emphasis here you can get some great sermons on how one is to persevere in doing ‘God’s work in the face of rejection. This is certainly a good message but this is not where I would like us to focus today. I don’t think this is the main message of this passage. **It seems to me that this passage is about the kingdom of God and how we as individuals, as pairs, as households AND especially as communities can reflect the reality of God’s kingdom shalom in this world.** Today we are going to focus on kingdom communities.

In the Bible the emphasis is always on kingdom communities rather than on individuals. True, communities are made up of individuals and the Bible certainly has some great stories about individuals struggling to come to know God to and obey God, but none-the-less, the primary emphasis is always on kingdom communities. Furthermore, when individuals do the will of God the Bible almost always celebrates their being part of people of God, the God movement, the kingdom community, where God’s peace reigns supreme and all enjoy the fruits of shalom, God’s peace, in the here and now, not just in the future.

The opposite is also true. Communities that do not align themselves with God's shalom, God's peace, bring judgment on themselves. In the Hebrew Scriptures we are told that God sets before us the ways that lead to life and the ways that lead to death. We are told to choose, knowing full well that our choices will determine what kind of community we will be.

We see all this beautifully expressed in our Gospel passage today. Notice the emphasis on communities. First of all Jesus' followers are not sent out one by one. They are sent out two by two, mini-communities. There is no talk of individuals accepting their kingdom message. There is only talk of households and cities receiving them and their message. They are told if they enter a house and are welcomed to first say, **"Peace to this house! And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not it will return to you."** Notice Jesus is confident that there are households and communities out there who already have the peace of God that passes understanding. They are already living out this peace. Even before Jesus' followers arrive they are living out precepts of God's kingdom shalom. This shouldn't surprise us. Over and over again in the New Testament Jesus meets people who he either points to or tells, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." In other words they are so close they can taste it already. They demonstrate that that they are filled with God's peace by doing what? They demonstrate they are filled with God's peace by being hospitable to strangers.

It is worth noting that not only is Jesus confident that there are households and communities out there who are faithful to God and who will

demonstrate their faithfulness through hospitality to strangers, but he also is quite sure that there are households and communities who are NOT faithful to God and who will not be hospitable to strangers. He says he sends them out into the world **“as sheep among wolves.”** Jesus knows that all too often it is a “dog eat dog world” out there. Jesus knows they will be rejected and ejected from some homes and towns. Some homes and towns do not know the meaning of hospitality and jealously guard every scrap of food, like a dog growling over its bowl when ever anyone comes near.

To this later group Jesus tells his followers to say the following, **“Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near. I tell you on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.”**

Now this is a very revealing comment. First, because the people of that town have not shared food, water and shelter with them they a not to take anything from that town, not even the dust on their feet! Second, even though they have not acted in a kingdom of God kind of way, they had their chance. Had they chosen to be hospitable they could have lived in a kingdom of God kind of way and enjoyed all the benefits thereof. Third, because they chose differently they will receive a worse judgment than Sodom did in ancient days, when it was destroyed by God.

Now we need to stop a moment here to explore what Jesus is referring to here, by mentioning Sodom. We probably all vaguely remember that Sodom was destroyed by fire and brimstone. We might even have some vague sense that it was destroyed because of sexual immorality. After all there is the word sodomy that refers to various unacceptable sexual acts. In fact

there is a rather horrible sexual dimension to the story that reveals the painful truth about the place of women in that patriarchal society. You can read the story in Genesis chapter 19 but let me recap it for you.

Two angels come to Sodom and Lot graciously invites them to stay in his home, shades of entertaining angels unawares. He gives them a good meal and just as they are about to retire for the evening townspeople arrive outside the house and demand that the guest be brought to them that they might “know” them, have forced sex with them. When Jesus said he sends us out into the world as sheep among wolves he is not kidding!

Lot, quite naturally, is horrified at this suggestion. This is where the story gets even more horrendous by modern standards. Lot offers his very own daughters to townspeople, if they will leave his guests alone! This is unimaginable to us today, and rightly so, but it does highlight the extreme importance that was being placed on hospitality to strangers. Richard W. Swanson writes, **“Wanderers are to be treated as family, welcomed, and fed. They are to be protected even above family. This is the principle behind actions in the oldest stories, actions that are offensive and unimaginable in any other contexts. ... Remember that hospitality was an obligation beyond all others.”** (*Provoking the Gospel of Luke* p. 160)

Now let’s throw into our consideration to other interpretations of what happened in Sodom and why. The first comes from Ezekiel 16:49, **“This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.”**

The second comes from the oral rabbinic tradition that eventually was written down in the Babylonian Talmud: **“The men of Sodom waxed haughty only on account of the good which the Holy One, blessed be He, had lavished upon them They said: Since there cometh forth bread out of (our) earth, and it hath the dust of gold, why should we suffer wayfarers, who come to us only to deplete our wealth. Come, let us abolish the practice of traveling in our land.”** (*Babylonian Talmud, tractate 109a*)

For Jesus and the early Christian community these were not ancient stories that were nice to read and maybe even get a spiritual lift from. Jesus goes straight from preaching to meddling! He refers them to the story of Sodom and once his listeners have this story firmly in mind he brings it right home to the present day. He starts talking about cities of his day: Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. Of the later he raises the question **“...will you be exalted in heaven?”**

In the spirit of this one reading this today can not help be ask, “Will New York, Dallas, Denver, San Diego, and yes, even New Braunfels ... will we be exalted in heaven for our actions? Do we measure up to kingdom community standards? How do we treat strangers and wayfarers? Or do we ask like Sodom of old “...why should we suffer wayfarers, who come to us to deplete our wealth? Come let us abolish wayfaring in our land.”

Having just gotten back from my 12th mission trip to Tijuana, Mexico and listening to the ongoing debate about immigration in this country I can't help but read this passage and think about this issue. It is said that we already have up to twelve million illegal aliens in our midst with tens of

thousands more arriving every month. I don't pretend to have all the answers to this complex issue but here are some preliminary thoughts.

1. Every country has a right to regulate its border. This should be done to protect the country and its citizens, but it should be done in as humane a way as possible, taking into consideration the civil rights and often very real needs of those seeking entry.
2. Very few people leave their homeland because they want to. They leave because of economic necessity, to seek a better life for their families and themselves. If they could provide the basics of food, shelter, education for their children and health care in their home countries, they would in all likelihood stay there.
3. I have seen the high tech fence between San Diego and Tijuana many times. There is talk of building similar fences in many other places along the 2,000 mile border between Mexico and the U.S. This will only funnel the flood of illegal aliens further out into the desert. It is estimate in the last 10 years over 3,000 have died in the desert trying to seek a better life for their families and themselves. No matter how high we build the fence people will burrow under it, go over it or go around it.
4. It is estimated that even the limited fence we want to build will costs \$5 billion. It will cost billions more to maintain and patrol. I wonder how much our government has spent and how much energy it has put into improving the living conditions in Mexico and Central America? It would seem this would be a better investment.
5. We need some kind of expanded guest worker program, one that protects the rights, working conditions, salaries and benefits of

U.S. workers and those of the guest workers who participate. We are told over and over again that these workers are desperately needed by countless businesses all over the U.S. Many who are here illegally are taken advantage of by businesses. Many who are here illegally are separated from their families permanently because it is hard and dangerous to go back and forth. Many would happily work here for a few years and go back rather than settle permanently, albeit illegally.

6. Finally, the most controversial question has been that of amnesty for the estimated 12 million illegal aliens who are already here. As a practical matter I don't see how all these people can be rounded up and sent back. They are already contributing members of this society whether they are legal or illegal. They pick our food, build our homes, care for our children, serve our food, clean our homes and work on our yards. They pay taxes here, save their money and send money home to their families in Mexico. Some kind of process needs to be set in place to either allow them to be guest workers or to seek citizenship with all the rights and responsibilities that go with it. This seems to me to be both the practical and the moral path, keeping in mind the lessons of our passage from the Gospel of Luke.

Kingdom communities have always welcomed the strangers and the wayfarers. Kingdom communities are called to treat them as brothers and sisters in Christ. If we do, the promise is that God's shalom will multiply and all can experience the fullness of God's shalom, the peace that passes understanding. Amen.

