

The Kingdom of God Has Come Near (Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, July 4, 2010)

Luke 10:1-12, 16-20 (TEV) ¹After this the Lord chose another seventy-two men and sent them out two by two, to go ahead of him to every town and place where he himself was about to go. ²He said to them, “There is a large harvest, but few workers to gather it in. Pray to the owner of the harvest that he will send out workers to gather in his harvest. ³Go! I am sending you like lambs among wolves. ⁴Don’t take a purse or a beggar’s bag or shoes; don’t stop to greet anyone on the road. ⁵Whenever you go into a house, first say, ‘Peace be with this house.’ ⁶If someone who is peace-loving lives there, let your greeting of peace remain on that person; if not, take back your greeting of peace. ⁷Stay in that same house, eating and drinking whatever they offer you, for workers should be given their pay. Don’t move around from one house to another. ⁸Whenever you go into a town and are made welcome, eat what is set before you, ⁹heal the sick in that town, and say to the people there, ‘The Kingdom of God has come near you.’ ¹⁰But whenever you go into a town and are not welcomed, go out in the streets and say, ¹¹‘Even the dust from your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. But remember that the Kingdom of God has come near you!’ ¹²I assure you that on the Judgment Day God will show more mercy to Sodom than to that town!

¹⁶Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”

¹⁷The seventy-two men came back in great joy. “Lord,” they said, “even the demons obeyed us when we gave them a command in your name!”

¹⁸Jesus answered them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹Listen! I have given you authority, so that you can walk on snakes and scorpions and overcome all the power of the Enemy, and nothing will hurt you. ²⁰But don’t be glad because the evil spirits obey you; rather be glad because your names are written in heaven.”

Don’t you love it when the 4th of July comes on a Sunday? You get 3 days to celebrate. Yesterday you could have gone downtown for the Independence Day parade. Today you might celebrate the holiday with a picnic, or maybe you are planning your celebration tomorrow, which I understand is the “legal holiday”? And are you going to see the fireworks? Maybe you saw them last evening in Burlington, or will you go to Grimsly High School this evening? Don’t bother going to Reidsville – there are no fireworks there due to budget cuts. Or maybe more important than knowing where and when we can see fireworks, we should ask, why bother – why do we have fireworks anyway?

I read somewhere, a long time ago, that fireworks were invented by the Chinese. They used them almost like a weapon in battle. As they approached their enemies, in those days with not much more than clubs and spears, they would send off their rockets, which would explode in the air, and scare the living dickens out of their enemies, hopefully causing them to turn and run for fear the sky was falling.

Of course, our fireworks are not used this way at all – they are symbolic of the battles fought for our freedom. Maybe when we see the fireworks we think about those words in the National Anthem, “...and the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air...” But those were not fireworks with people sitting on the banks of the Potomac saying “oooh and aah!” Those rockets and bombs that Francis Scott Key wrote about were real, fired on us by the enemy, trying to turn us back into a colony, and what we see by the dawn’s early light is that we have survived – the flag is still there. The war was not over, the battle had NOT been won – we just made it through the night, into another day, where we would need to persevere and continue the struggle. And if we forget, if we no longer give our best to preserving that freedom, it can still be lost. Hopefully, in the midst of our fireworks and picnics, we will remember that, and we will continue to encourage those who must fight, even today, to preserve our freedoms.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is talking about a different kind of fireworks. When the 72 returned from their missionary venture, as they were reporting their success, Jesus told them, “I saw Satan fall

like lightening from heaven.” Now that would be some fireworks to see, don’t you think? But what does it mean? Is it something like those ancient Chinese fireworks that should frighten the enemies of God? Some have taken this position, saying that this was when Satan came to earth, and is now more active than ever before, tempting and tormenting us poor men and women as we struggle through life. The fall of Satan should fill us with fear, these folks claim.

Or on the other hand, maybe Satan’s fall is it like the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air, indicating that a fierce battle is raging, and that we have simply survived another night, to fight and struggle another day, against the adversary who would take away God’s gifts to us, gifts of freedom and salvation and eternal life.

As always, one verse of the Bible does not tell the whole story, but must be read in context. Jesus was going into the towns and villages across the Jordan River, into Capernaum and nearby towns. So he gathered 72 followers, or some translators say it was 70, and gave them instructions to go ahead and prepare each place for his visit. He told them to travel light – no bag, no purse, or in other words, no plans on what to do or how long to stay. But be focused – don’t stop to chat with folks along the way, don’t be distracted by the parades going by. And don’t go from house to house, don’t just drift around town, but connect with the people. Stay in a house, if they receive you. Let them provide for you, lodging and meals, as you minister to them.

We know that in those days, people didn’t travel much, and the people in small towns were very suspicious of strangers. The amount of warfare and bloodshed that was common in those days would appall us today. People in those towns and villages were as suspicious of these Galileans as we might be suspicious of a group people wearing white sheets walking down Market Street today. But those 72, or 70, went. And they were received, in peace. And God’s power was strong in them. And as they went two by two, into 36 villages and towns, I can hardly imagine their joy as they were received, as they were welcomed, as old injuries and hurts were healed, and in some cases, even reconciliation may have begun. I can hardly imagine the miracles those 72 may well have seen.

And as a result of all that was happening, can you imagine the excitement of those 72, when they came back to report to Jesus? As Scripture records, they told him, “Even the demons obeyed us when we gave them a command in your name!” The Kingdom of God has truly come near, as the people living in the trans-Jordan welcomed the Galileans, who had come in the name of Jesus Christ. It was just as Jesus told them in verse 16, “...the one who rejects you, rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects the one who sent me.” Or turn that around and put it in positive terms, the many people who received these 72 who had gone ahead to prepare the way for Jesus had also received Jesus, and thereby had also received God. The kingdom of God had really come near to them when they received those who were sent.

But the battle wasn’t over – the way was not yet won. Jesus had to move beyond those villages to the city of Jerusalem, and confront the powers of the world, and suffer, and die, so that he might be raised by God and conquer death itself.

And just as the battle was not over for Jesus, so the battle is not over for us today. Each one of us will face temptations, challenges, perhaps heartbreak and suffering, and surely death. But don’t forget the fireworks! Jesus saw them, and told us about them, and they mean something today, for us! For whenever you accept one who comes in the name of Christ, you accept Christ, and you accept the one who sent him, God the Father. When broken relationships are healed, when walls that divide people are broken down, when healing occurs, when unity in Christ is shown, the Kingdom of God has come near.

That doesn’t mean it is all over – there is still a lot of work to do. But let us never forget what God has already done for us. Let us continue to press on to the next battle, and the next, until the last enemy, even death, is defeated.

May the kingdom of God come near to you today, as you accept one another in the name of Christ and as you hold fast to your hope for eternal life, through Jesus Christ. Amen.