

## **Your Names Are Written In Heaven**

Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

Cradock Presbyterian Church

July 15, 2012

This passage is all about mission to the community. Some would have it be about foreign mission, but it can't be: the way Jesus sent these 70 out means they were "going local." And in the verses I left out of the reading, Jesus names three local places – Bethsaida, also known as Bethesda, Chorazin, and Capernaum – as places that should repent, and maybe haven't. No question in my mind, this is all about a mission to the community.

It's about taking risks, too. Even if you are going to a nearby town, going without provisions or spare clothing is out of the ordinary. Relying totally on the hospitality of the people you go to is tough! But the people who received the message about Jesus had a role in this: if they really accepted it, they would show it by taking care of these men who had brought the message to them. Still, you have to admit, for those seventy men, this was a real reaching out in faith.

We here today are faced with the same kind of mission that those seventy faced. No less than for them, our Lord calls us to go out into the field. That's because if the harvest was plentiful then, it's a record bumper crop, potentially, today. At least the towns to which the disciples were going were Jewish towns! Those people already knew God; the seventy were simply telling them that God's promises were being fulfilled in Jesus. They had a considerable head start on the mission we have to do today.

You remember how it used to be, don't you? Everybody went to church, or at least claimed to go. The society and culture viewed that as the good, right thing to do.

Several church scandals later, many years of worrying about Attendance, Buildings, and Cash – the ABCs – later, people have turned away from the church, and that means from the message of Good News we bring. Now, whole generations have grown up without knowing who Jesus is – just like the people Jesus sent the seventy to, who needed to hear that Jesus was in fact their Messiah.

So that means that there is a potential harvest out there that we haven't seen in centuries. Don't you have to plant seeds in order to have a harvest? Yes, you do – and God has already done it. But those seeds need watering, they need cultivating, so the weeds are gone and the good soil can help the harvest come. That means laborers are needed. That means you and me. WE are the ones God will send out, just like he sent out the seventy.

Right away, I can sense that some of you might be a little uneasy. What does he have in mind? What are we going to have to do? I imagine those seventy men felt quite apprehensive as they began hearing the instructions from Jesus. And he was honest: This won't be easy. It will be so hard sometimes, you'll feel like you're a lamb in the midst of wolves. You'll wonder if you're going to get eaten alive out there, because of this mission you're on! With all these worries, how can any group, especially one as small as seventy, ever succeed?

The answer comes from Jesus, though you might not have caught it at first. "The laborer deserves to be paid," he says. At first glance, it sounds like he's maybe just talking about the food and shelter the seventy will receive when they go out. But that can't be it; there were many itinerant preachers in their day who went around preaching;

giving them a place to stay temporarily and food and drink was never considered a wage, or a reward. No, this is about the success of their mission. Because if they DON'T get the food and drink, they can't succeed; and, Jesus is saying, You WILL succeed. You'll SEE the results of your work. And that's your reward, the one you deserve.

As I pause to take that in, as I reflect on what that probably meant to the men who heard it that day, I think about what it means for us. If we choose to be God's representatives, like that seventy, God will see to it that we have OUR reward. We will get to see the results of our labors in a bountiful harvest. Could it mean that Cradock Presbyterian Church will grow in numbers and strength? That just might be. God will be the one who gives out the reward, and we can trust God to be generous, and fair.

As you hear that, I suppose it puts images in your mind of going door-to-door with Bibles and tracts! Not so! That would put off people so fast, we 'd do our mission more harm than good by a long-shot. What Jesus says next gives us a clue as to how to proceed, as well as some powerful comfort. "Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you," he says, "eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" There can be no other way of understanding it, in my mind, than to say: "*Meet them where they are.*" We don't have to be anything other than what God has made each of us to be! And we don't have to act like any other church; we just have to act like the one God has caused to come into being at the corner of Afton and Prospect in the community of Cradock.

That's perhaps the hardest thing for people to hear, and it might have gotten lost in all that we were trying to do with the Healthy Growing Congregations things. We were sent into mission *because of who we are*. We will be welcomed *because of who we are*.

Now, we won't always be successful – that's why Jesus told the seventy, and us, what to do when they came to a town that didn't want to hear his Good News. Wiping the dust off one's feet was a symbolic way of both putting a town or people behind you, but also removing responsibility for *their* decisions. *They're* the ones responsible! God doesn't call us to beat our heads against the wall! He calls us to go on to the next ones who need to be harvested. There will always be more!

Now, what happened when the seventy went on their mission? We DON'T hear them talk about any "dust-wiping!" Instead, we hear about astounding success. When they say, "Lord, in your name *even* the demons submit to us!" they are saying something slightly different than at first glance. In the original language, the word translated here "even" is the one usually translated "and." It's used just like we use "and," either as an add-on or a step-up. Here I think it's a "step-up." It means that *not only* have people received those disciples and their word gladly; but *in addition to or beyond that*, demons submit to their preaching!

Now look! I don't anticipate that we're going to be doing any exorcisms here in Cradock! But I do think there is a *large* number of people who would hear the Good News *we* bring, the way *we* bring it, gladly. You remember that part about "the laborer deserves his reward?" There's not a doubt in my mind that if we do in fact labor, we will

receive a reward. And that reward will surely be success in our mission, just as it was for those seventy who went for Jesus.

How powerful was their success? Jesus had two things to say. "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning" was the first. I've always taken this passage to be Jesus telling us that Satan was finally defeated, dead and gone; because no one could survive a fall from the heights of heaven. I'm sure those first seventy heard it as validation of the power and authority Jesus had given them; that's why they were able to cast out demons. But Jesus says, "Do not rejoice at this." Really? That seems like something pretty powerful that you ought to rejoice about! No, the reward gets better, and more ultimate: "...but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

There can be no more powerful validation; there is no greater joy. To have your name written in heaven means you are among God's inner circle. It means your life here is blessed, and your life ever after is confirmed. To those who returned from an arduous mission, one that already caused them great joy, now their joy was made complete.

I don't think I'm stretching things or being presumptuous to suggest that each of us has a "line" reserved in heaven, a line upon which our name can be written. Shall we do the things God needs us to do, to bring in a powerful harvest of believers? If we do, then God is ready to rejoice, heavenly pen in hand. Think about that, as these next weeks and months unwind, and we continue to discover what God's will and intention is for each of us, and for our church.