

Messengers

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, 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. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, 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.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, '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. Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." - Luke 10:1-12,16-20

A football legend named Rocky Bleier first distinguished himself as a running back for Xavier High School in Appleton, Wisconsin, in the early 1960s. He went on to join the Fighting Irish and played on Notre Dame's 1966 national title team.

The Pittsburgh Steelers drafted Rocky Bleier in January, 1968 ... but most of us here remember 1968. Before the pro season began Bleier was drafted again, this time into the Army, and was soon deployed to Viet Nam. In August of 1969, during a ground battle in the Que San Valley, he was hit in the left thigh by machine gun fire and then further injured by a grenade as he crawled to safety. He was airlifted to a military hospital in Tokyo. In due time, the doctors wrote up his discharge from the Army due to disability and told him that he would never play football again.

One year after he was injured at Que San, Rocky Bleier showed up at the Steelers' training camp and was placed on injured reserve. Two years later, he played special teams and began running again. The next year, 1974, Bleier helped lead the Steelers to a Super Bowl championship. He and the Steelers were Super Bowl champions three more times over the next decade.

Rocky Bleier is still living. When he tells how he made his way from crippling battlefield injuries to the Super Bowl, he describes one message that made all the difference. At the lowest point during his hospitalization, he received a postcard from Art Rooney, the Pittsburgh Steelers' owner. The postcard had only one line. It said, "We'll see you when you get back." That's all. "We'll see you when you get back."

Who can say why that message transformed Rocky Bleier? Who knows why the human heart responds the way that it does? But some of us here may remember a time when a simple, direct message changed our lives. The message may have been a one-liner on a postcard, or it came in a phone call or was delivered face to face. Maybe the message was one of encouragement when we were about to give up. Maybe it brought into the light some wrongdoing that we needed to confront. Maybe the message opened or closed a door that needed to be opened or closed.

In today's story from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has a message to share with the world, including you and me. His message is plainly stated in one line in the middle of the text: Whether or not you are ready to hear it, whether or not you recognize its significance, whether or not you take it to heart and are prepared to respond to it: "The kingdom of God has come near you." The kingdom of God has come near you in the person of Jesus, the Messiah, and he is a powerful message, changing lives for good, restoring hope where despair has reigned, shining light in the darkness, healing broken lives.

Jesus cannot get his message out fast and far enough alone, so he commissions an entire community of messengers. Seventy souls are entrusted to deliver the message with him and for him and in his name.¹ Many of us here, I gather, I hope, can recall the messenger who made it around to us. Their message about Jesus compelled us and doubly so because they were living, shining examples of the message. Some of us here might say that it is because of those messengers that we are still here in faith today.

Stories with similar outlines and intentions and outcomes are also told in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. In those gospels, however, Jesus commissions only the elite twelve disciples. Luke's version recalls seventy messengers. Why seventy? We can't exactly answer that question, but it may have partly been due to the fact that Luke himself became a believer in Jesus through the witness of a second-hand, or third-hand or fourth-hand messenger. By tradition, all of the other gospel authors – Matthew, Mark and John – were eyewitnesses of Christ's glory. By contrast, Luke's faith relied on someone who knew someone who knew someone who had known Jesus. More than any other gospel author, Luke would have understood the value of a faithful messenger.

Expanding on this premise, Luke may have wanted to emphasize that the call to be a Jesus-messenger was not and is not to be confined to an elite few, those with the advanced degrees, or those who wear silk vestments and stand in pulpits. Luke may have been wanting to convey that *“If you've heard the message of Jesus, and if your life has been transformed for good because of it, then you too are a messenger.”* Consider the countless souls out there, literally dying to know that the kingdom of God has come near to them in Jesus.

For what it's worth, seventy is just about exactly the number of souls who took part in worship here at Church of the Ascension last Sunday. It's not a lot. It's not as many as you or I might like. I so wish I could say that it was 170 or even 1700. But let's not lose sight of the fact that in Luke's vision and experience, seventy souls were enough to change the world.

This may be the point at which resistance begins to arise within us. *“That's just not my gift!” “Let me come to your office and explain my doubts.” “But first let me go and say goodbye to those at home.”* Or we may feel overwhelmed by living in a time that is so grossly oversaturated with so many messages of so little value. Just this past week a *Chicago Tribune* feature explained how many minutes of the vapid TV sitcom *The Office* had been viewed on Netflix in one recent 12-month period. Can you take a guess? Would you believe 46 billion minutes?² I don't mention that statistic to disparage all entertainment, and it's even possible that some of the five household members on my own Netflix account represent a few hundred of those 46 billion minutes. But how can the message of Jesus compete with 46 billion minutes? Even if we are willing to share the message of Jesus, how will we possibly be heard amidst the tidal wave of online streaming and Twitter and the ever-rising flood of our own emails?

Those questions may be best answered in some other setting where we might share the stories of our own faith and resilience. For now I will argue as a premise of my own faith that, even in our message-bloated culture, the message of Jesus remains powerful. Those seventy whom Jesus sent out returned and proclaimed that *‘even the demons submit to us.’* The message of Jesus has continued and continues to call into submission the demons of every age, including our own.

To bring it down to a more personal and measurable level: Surely we all know at least one person whose life may be forever changed if we write them the postcard, if we make the visit, if we show up and deliver the Jesus message with faith, hope and love: *“The kingdom of God has come near you.”*

If Luke were here in the pulpit today, he might ask us:

What is your Jesus message?

Who is waiting or needing or even dying to receive the message?

Are you willing to be counted among the seventy?

¹ Some ancient texts indicate that Jesus sent out 72, not 70, messengers.

² *Chicago Tribune*, Wednesday, July 3.