

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
3 July 2016

Scripture readings: Galatians 6 (1-6), 16-20 Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

In the Church in England when they become disgruntled, particularly about things like the ordination of women and human sexuality and so forth, the conservatives align themselves with the bishops in Africa. When I did my Ph.D. at Drew University, a Methodist school, it was known as the Princeton of Korea. One of the things we knew about a lot of the Korean students who came to Drew was that they came with their 19th century hymnals and a lot of conservative theological ideas and ecclesiastical understandings. Among those who were 'missionized' in the 19th century, they were left with 19th century ideas. And so when people want to go backwards they go to where that seed was planted, maybe watered a little bit and not challenged or invited to grow along with the ideas and the times and the people in those places as vigorously perhaps as it has here, and it hasn't done that here all the time or in every place either. The Methodist Church's struggle with human sexuality at the moment is essentially an issue between the North and the South, as I understand it. Although we've had our own experience with Hamlin and South Sterling. There's always going to be that.

And here is Jesus sending out seventy people to do missionary work. Well, I'd have to have a chat with Jesus about that. Wouldn't you? What in the world is it you want people to do? I don't know whether or not you've read this book. I recommend it. Most high school and college students are familiar with Chinua Achebe's book, *Things Fall Apart*. He is a Nigerian author who writes about the effects of Christian missionaries on Nigerian culture, Nigerian communities and how that works out and it ain't a pretty picture.

We take time this week to remember American independence. Independence from whom? Certainly not the indigenous American people who have become enslaved and entrapped and imperialized and pushed onto reservations. Think about it every time you go up 191 and you go by the buffalo farm. Just remember.

And here is Jesus sending out seventy, two by two. That's 35 pairs to missionize, to carry a gospel message. Well, gospel means good news. When white people learned about this continent they brought disease, war, disruption, superiority, god of their own kind. When we've done that...what was the point of putting floppy, comfortable African women in Victorian corsets and long dresses? But that was a religious idea. You all know that.

All of this stuff was done in the name of Christ, dividing households - this one believes, that one doesn't. What is mission work all about? If we are honest and pause to ask what we have done to other people with what we have said was the gospel in the name of and for the sake of Christ, it's not always a good or a pretty picture. It often looks very much like the activities of an empire - imperialism, subjugation. It has economic, social, cultural implications that horrify us after the fact if we bother to take time to look at them. We don't have to go outside of our country. All we have to do is stay inside the church and see how we deal with theological ideas when we start slapping each other in the face and beating each other over the head with scripture "as God gives it to me." And we know we're right. As a Lutheran I used to say about the Lutheran and the Episcopal Churches that the difference was that at the Reformation we had the Book and they kept the clothing. *[laughter]*

And then how refreshing to see a pope in Rome go to the Oriental Church in Albania where there has been division since about the year 1052. That's a long time to have a fight. Those folks only accepted about the first three of the ecumenical creeds and then stopped there and couldn't agree with the West. The pope in Rome is not saying, as we have become accustomed to hearing over the years, "If you do it our way, we welcome you home and everything will be all right. Just come home." The pope is saying, "No, we're brothers and sisters. We might disagree but we can love each other." What a different approach! And I think it's honest. And I did see also this week the graciousness of that man as he was willing to celebrate the 65th ordination anniversary of his predecessor who in every respect, in my opinion, was so much unlike the current pope that it's remarkable. And there in the Sala Clementina, this extraordinarily beautiful Renaissance salon, sat the former pope and the current pope who was being gracious to a man who in many respects, although nobody could say it, had antithetical and very, very different ideas about the Church and the world and our role in this world, being gracious to one who probably left him a mess.

And so what is it we're going to get out of the lessons today? I think if we pay a little bit of attention we might learn something because what is it that Jesus is saying here? "See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves." What does that mean? "Carry no purse." That means you don't need money to be a Christian. "Carry no bag."

Well, I'm soon going to get ready to go to England. James always got his suitcase out weeks ahead of time. I always pack the day before I leave. I always pack four times as much as I need, divide it in half and then pay extra freight to get my luggage back home to bring home the clean clothing I took and didn't use. *[laughter]* To me to carry no bag is beyond my imagination and has nothing to do with being fashionable or even perhaps very clean, but it has to do with being efficient and mobile. Carry no purse. Carry no bag. I don't have any explanation for not wearing shoes. I can't do it. I can't even walk around the house shoeless.

But I must tell you being without shoes means something. Many years ago James and I were trying to have a vacation in Haiti. We found out that Haiti is not a place where you can have a vacation. We occupied a hotel, and I think we were perhaps the only two people in the entire hotel. We had a swimming pool about half the size of this room filled with clean water. On the street outside were children who were going up to the top of the hill to someone kind enough to give them clean water. They filled tin cans and carried them home on their heads. The can of water had to weigh twice as much as the kids themselves and was certainly half their size. And we were supposed to enjoy a swimming pool full of clean water.

It was in Haiti when we were taken to the beach that we went through the dump. And I mean *dump!* I'm not talking about DeNaples' kind of landfills in Scranton which are neat and covered and managed and all the rest of it. I'm talking about junk, dirt, filth, garbage heaped in the wide open and people living in cardboard boxes on top of the garbage. And we saw people, human beings, not only without shoes but working in the cane fields without clothing, without anything.

Then Jesus is saying, *"If you want to be a missionary, and I want you to be a missionary, do this: Understand and identify with and make yourself in some degree or another poor enough to identify with the poor."* Now, how do we do that? I don't know but I think I may see it on Sunday mornings when that little South American man of Italian extraction looks out of the window of this extraordinary Renaissance palace from incredible grandeur and wealth and reminds the world to at least remember, pay attention to and be sensitive to the plight of the poor and the disenfranchised. And he doesn't say, *"Give me all your money."* Frankly, friends, we know that throwing money at poverty doesn't work very well, does it. But identifying with the poor and the disenfranchised and the marginalized allows us to grow in lives that take positions every day politically, socially, religiously and in every other respect that remember the poor, the disenfranchised, the marginalized and those unjustly treated. In everything we do, with every vote we cast, with everything we imagine and in every relationship we have that we seek justice for those we could ignore and toward whom we could turn our backs and say, *"Too bad, buddy. You were born at the wrong time and the wrong place, and that's it for you."*

That may have something to do with carrying no purse. The older I get the more obscene it becomes when the wealthy think the answer to poverty is some of my money. Keep it. Keep it! If you're not going to have a relationship with those people, you will never understand the wealth that they have which outnumbers your dollars and cents. You will never have a relationship with that part and that individual and that incarnation of God's presence in the world which will keep you poor no matter what you've got in the bank. Stuff your money!

No bag! Christianity isn't a fashion show. And can you believe this - at the eight o'clock mass I forgot to put on the chasuble. Imagine that! It was a great mass, by the way - 23 people here. Be careful, ten o'clock. They're going to move in. They're going to take your church! *[laughter]*

No sandals. I can't give an explanation. I don't get what that means except feeling, perhaps, the earth beneath our feet - the earth we frequently call "mother" who gives birth to us and to every other human being in the world. Feel the source of your creation. Believe that from the bottom of your being there is a God who brings you into being and into a family which includes every other louse in the world.

"Now," Jesus says to 35 pairs of Christians, *"Go into the world this way - with a sense of others who are surely very different from yourself - poor, disenfranchised, marginalized. Don't go with a bag full of tricks to exercise your superiority, your bag full of vestments, your bag full of headdresses, your bag full of Chanel and Tommy Hilfiger, etc. clothes to prove that you've got it and they ain't. Don't go to anybody with all of this garbage that collects around us in our lives and in our churches. Feel the earth under your feet and take this message to everyone with you. At whatever house you enter..."* Now I don't get what's going on here because it says, *"You go in a house, you say 'peace with you' and they don't say 'peace with you' - stay there anyway and eat their food."* I'd be afraid of being poisoned.

There aren't any clergy here today. By the way, our Methodist friends are in the Methodist Church in Moscow. All the Methodist Churches are getting new pastors today so my instruction to Hugh and Sarah was, "Go say hello to the new pastor in Moscow and tell her you're going to be worshipping here." [laughter]

Every clergyperson in the world and every stewardship committee in the world has probably used this quotation that the laborer should be paid the wages he or she deserves. I'm not sure what the hospitality implications are here in the gospel, but I do get this. The message given to the seventy who are sent out in English boils down to four words. This is what the missionary message is all about. This is the only message a missionary should have. "Peace to this house." That has nothing to do with agreeing with me. That has nothing to do with signing the dotted line under a creed, if after the first three you stop signing. It has nothing to do with saying the right prayer, using the right liturgy. It has nothing to do with anything other than, "I bring to your house something other than war. I bring to you peace."

As recently as yesterday or the day before I heard on the BBC radio channel a discussion about studies that are being done between groups of chimpanzees and bonobos. Do you know what bonobos are? I didn't either. They apparently look like chimpanzees and are almost the same but not. They're different strains. One of the major differences between chimpanzees and bonobos - and by the way, these are our closest genetic relatives in creation - chimpanzees are patriarchal, male-dominant, way more violent societies. They kill each other. Bonobos are many fewer and are really only in a certain place in Africa, are matriarchal, significantly less violent, and they don't kill each other.

Now why is that important for a church on Sunday? Well, as some say, "It ain't my circus and it ain't my monkey." Well, it is. This is God's creation and we are God's creation. And it says to us that even in evolutionary science and understanding there are possibilities for creatures to be different in the way they organize their societies and to be peaceful. Now one of the things that makes humans different from bonobos and chimpanzees is we have choice. We can choose. We can pick. We can elect. And I think we all know that we have what we call a human nature. St. Paul is good at human nature and lower nature and all that kind of stuff.

Are there any sinless people here? Well, if you are, you can go home. [laughter] We confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean and cannot save ourselves. But we also confess, believe and teach that we are made in the image and likeness of God, that we have choice, we have brains, and that there is more to us than our knee-jerk response. Vito asked me before mass, "Can we sit down and talk because I nurture this very, very bad feeling about ISIS and I want to know what to do about it." Great question! No, we don't encourage people to hurt each other. We don't encourage people to kill each other. And we do make choices. And the beautiful thing about the question is how do I as a human being make a choice when my knee-jerk reaction, my inner spirit, my self, my gut wants to just hate these people. This is a wonderful place for us to be as a congregation. We do it by believing and by reasoning, I think.

Now our message to the world comes from Jesus, and there are at least three people in our experience who understood that message profoundly and deeply: Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. They understood, not pacifism, but they understood meeting violence with peace, and that takes guts. It takes nerve, and it also takes the reason to understand that people hijack Islam the way people hijack Christianity. Do you want to listen to people who call themselves Christians with whom I disagree and to whom I would say, "That's not my brand of Christianity. That's not my concept of God, and I don't hear Jesus saying any of that."

It happened here. It happens every day. It happens in the world. This is precisely why at the last Vestry meeting the Vestry here asked the ecumenical group to show the film *Praying for Bobby* which is about a right-wing religious mother who's a Bible-believing Christian who happens to have a gay son, and she tries to pray him out of his God-given identity. And the kid tries too, and it doesn't work so he jumps off an overpass into traffic and kills himself. This is a true story. At his funeral she's afraid of all his friends. She moves all the paper plates because she's afraid of getting AIDS, etc., etc., etc. In the end she wakes up to the Gospel message of God's love for God's creation and her child was God's gift to her. She becomes an activist for gay rights. Too little, too late, but better than nothing. Better late than never.

And so it is that Christianity is as much hijacked as is Islam. Although it happens closer to us and it doesn't seem as threatening to us, what happened to us here a couple of years ago was violence. It didn't involve guns, it didn't involve bullets, but it was violence. It's all the same as far as I'm concerned. It was an attempt to assassinate character rather than people.

So it's not going to be easy because we do have those responses to people who act in ways that are totally inappropriate. Scrap all of religion. You just don't treat other people that way. The challenge for us is to understand that all of Christianity doesn't behave the way we do. But the invitation from Jesus today to be missionaries with what we

believe, teach and know and understand as Christianity is this simple message: Peace be to this house. And we've got enough to work on in Christianity before we ever go anywhere else in the world because Christianity isn't at peace. We have foreigners here from St. Luke's in Scranton, for God's sake. [laughter] And so it's a tough one, but it means that our job isn't done, that we're never finished as Christians. Think of where we were with race relationships a mere fifty years ago. Think of Leontyne Price who traveled with the Metropolitan Opera to Georgia where she could sing, be applauded, celebrated and *not* stay in the hotel. And then think of Rudolf Bing who said, "*If you're not going to take care of her, we're not singing for you either.*" That's in our lifetime, for God's sake. So the question is complex, but we have this extraordinary tradition that says the answer is this: Peace and Love.

Now to have no purse means to have no defense budget. To have no bag has no uniform. To have no sandals certainly means to have no boots.

And I must tell you this. Last night I was dragged kicking and screaming to fireworks in Moscow, Pennsylvania. [laughter] When I agreed to go I said, "*The understanding is that if I'm too tired to go, I won't.*" Well, I was too tired but I did. I'm so wonderful. I just want you to know what an example of Christian priesthood this is. We had a lovely dinner and we went to the fireworks in Moscow. I was watching all of this extraordinary, overwhelmingly beautiful stuff, but at one point it was just bright lights and concussion that I felt in my chest. I was certain that the brick wall against which I was leaning so that I could lift up my poor post-surgical neck [laughter] that the brick wall was moving. And then I remembered when I was in seminary my brother was in Viet Nam shooting a howitzer and how those sounds and those bright explosive lights meant not joy, not celebration, but impending death and a waste of life and money. And then I remembered that great black granite wall in Washington, D.C. with 58,000 names on it. I asked the question last night and I ask it again today: For what? Because when one nation goes to another nation and says anything different than *Peace to this house*, we are no longer missionaries. And probably questionably Christian. It's tough stuff. Simple. Tough.

I don't know how to say this in a sermon so I'll do the best I can. When I've been at that wall in Washington designed by an Asian woman which I find fascinating for starters, it reminds me of a large men's urinal, and all of those lives have been wasted down that drain because we sometimes forget our missionary message. *Peace to this house. Peace to this house.*

You can't export what you don't have, and you can't convince others that peace is good for them if you can't live it out in your own household. So it's not complicated, and if anyone is there who shares your peace, your peace will rest on that person. If not, it won't.

And so we live in a time and always have, Vito, when what you believe and teach and confess as Christians scandalizes us long before it scandalizes the world. We have to wake up to this business that what we have justified and sanctified in terms of religion is often wrong.

Back to Leontyne Price for a moment. James and I used to go because of his knowledge of these things and attention to them. We always attended Leontyne Price's birthday concert at Carnegie Hall which was always packed out and primarily with black folks who knew and loved her and her work. There were others, of course. I never, ever attended her concerts without going to tears. I thought of how our world has been denied so much in terms of art and beauty and knowledge and advancement and science and culture and religion because we think that it has something to do with the junk rather than the truth.

And so in the lessons today we read about religious people who think that religion has something to do with cutting off your foreskin. Now that sounds absolutely stupid! Or killing the right kind of animal or burning the right kind of incense or giving enough money, and it's all junk. Jesus says, "*No! That's not religion. Religion has to do with sharing peace.*" And you can't do it dishonestly because people will see through it when it's dishonest. And the only way you can do it is by looking somebody in the eye and running the risk of going into their home and being their guest. Now I think we know what going into that house means. Even if you're not received, sit there a while and get to know who your host is. You don't live in this world alone, and you can't expect the rest of the world to come here, especially if you're going to build walls. Who the hell would want to come?

And that's not political about immigration. That's just how we relate to other people in the world. And you don't need bricks and mortar to build walls. A cold shoulder will do. And it's more easily and readily understood than anything else in the world. "*You're not our kind. You're not a member. You don't belong.*" We do it all the time.

And so Jesus says to his missionaries, "*Go into the rest of the world and get to know people who are different*

from who you are. Don't take anything that represents power - not a closet full of designer clothes, not a pocket full of money, not even durable shoes." That reminds me of a joke. Do you know the name Birgit Nilsson, the great Swedish soprano who used to sing all of the great Wagner roles? Wagner operas have a tendency to last six hours. She was one of the greatest voices in the world. Somebody asked her what was the best preparation sing a Wagnerian role. She said, *"A good pair of comfortable shoes."* [laughter]

The point is this: Our religion is challenging, Vito. It's absolutely challenging, but it's also just as simple. We have one message for the world. We are all God's children. God loves all whom God creates. Many of us go off the rails very badly, often frequently and sometimes it seems to us irremediably but that does not deplete our hope that the gift of God's message to us of peace to this house and to all other houses is the wrong one. It isn't.

And so we're left to figure out how to do our religion. And how do we listen to what others have to say to us which we have been deaf to as well, because it won't happen without a conversation, an interchange of ideas. And that means we are going to be challenged as well. But our hope and God's promise is that it can happen. It must and it will or we won't go anywhere. Gandhi knew it. You may remember the story when someone went to Gandhi after a great physical fight between the Hindus and the Muslims and said, *"I feel very, very bad."* He was a Hindu and he had killed a Muslim child. He said to Gandhi, *"What do I do about this?"* Gandhi said, *"Take a child and raise him as a Muslim."* You want to fix it? Fix it. It has nothing to do with defending your own position. It has to do with sharing God's love. Friends, we know that works.

And so it is with the hippies of our day, as the peace-mongers of Christianity, we are willing to take a fresh daisy and slide its stem down the barrel of the rifles aimed at us in the rest of the world. Do you remember that image? Then I know how old you are! [laughter]

And so it is we are challenged to live our faith. Thank you for that question, Vito. If we aren't engaged in this, we're just wasting our time with religious junk and we're making ourselves self-righteous, and that really stinks after a while. We are bigger, we are better, and we are promised by God - and here's the clincher - that as we work at our faith and grow in it, we have strength to do that which comes from God. We don't do that stuff on our own. We don't do that stuff because we're smarter than anybody else or even better believers than anybody else. We are enabled to do that because we believe, teach and confess that God comes to us as we read challenging scripture like this and as we receive this sacrament where God says, *"I won't just feed you. I will live inside of you. I will climb into your body and be present there so that as I share this message of peace in foreign places with other people and those who didn't understand or know it, you will be able to also, not because you're smarter, not because you're better, but because God is with you."* You never do it alone. They were even sent out in pairs. Together as the Church we will constitute the living body of a present Christ in the world today in ways that will astonish us first and the rest of the world next.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.