

Sermon Proper 9
Year C

[RCL] 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:(1-6)7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Many of us learned to sing these words at summer camp.

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy
Down in my heart (Where?)
Down in my heart (Where?)
Down in my heart
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy
Down in my heart
Down in my heart to stay

Is this merely a child's song, one for happy little campers, freed from care and concern? Is it only about superficial gaiety? Or could it be a song that prepares children to one day learn the deeper, more mature understanding of the value called "joy?" Regardless, joy, with a central role in today's scripture readings, deserves our attention, especially at this moment in history.

The Psalmist demands of us: "Be joyful in God, all you lands!" More significantly, the Gospel account reminds us about the seventy disciples, sent out to spread the Good News of God in Christ, who returned successfully from their mission with a spirit of joy in their hearts.

No doubt, the seventy began with the expectant enthusiasm of aspiring novices, but they returned as seasoned ministers filled with genuine joy. Perhaps we can discover the quality and meaning of this kind of joy as we think through the guidelines and warnings Jesus set for them in the sending. As we compare what produced for them such joy, we can use it in our ministries as the current generation of Jesus-followers.

He sent them as lambs into the midst of wolves. It was a difficult, hostile world about which Jesus warned, one true to life in every time and place. The social environment included the usual crowd of bad guys, skeptics, Jewish fundamentalists, Samaritans, Gentiles, and Roman officials. In order to undertake the task they had to overcome their fears with courage and resolve.

Jesus told them to travel light – no purse, bag, or sandals. In order to get the job done, they would not have time to care about material possessions or to waste time on other distractions.

He ordered them, when not welcomed by a group, to wipe the dust off their feet and move on to the next place. The urgency of the moment would not allow them to linger in hopeless situations.

They went out among the people, dutifully accomplishing the mission. They were so successful that they returned in a spirit of joy. It wasn't a superficial, child-like joy of children returning to camp, but a deeper, satisfying, inner joy of the soul.

As the current members of the Body of Christ, we are the seventy for our generation. Our mission is not unlike that of those mentioned in Luke's Gospel account, and the guidelines and warnings are largely the same. The deep inner joy we can find in our 21st century mission for Christ can prove equally meaningful. As we follow our charge in the Baptismal Covenant, we seek to serve God's people by offering to them the good news of God in Christ, both in sharing the truth and in the actions of care and love.

We, too, go out among wolves. We live in a world that is fearful, emotionally paralyzed, or aggressively angry as a result of a kind of shell-shock. Many of us suffer from a form of post-traumatic stress disorder caused by acts of terrorism, near financial depression, natural disasters, and unexplainable violence in schools and shopping malls. Far too many of us are driven by fear and self-defensiveness to over-reactive and destructive actions.

Perhaps the hardest example to follow from Luke is to take with us no semblance of purse, bag, or sandal. Many of us are disabled by fear of loss in the midst of an overly-materialist culture, in our desire not to give up anything of our substance, of not being willing to do without what we want and think we need. But we can easily see how the baggage of materialism can disable us from taking committed action.

Making sense of shaking dust off our feet, a practice of pious Jews during New Testament times, is also difficult. Many of us disdain the idea of giving up on any task. But, perhaps the application for us is to make the best and wisest use of our time and energy – a prioritizing intended to maximize the effectiveness of our call to carry out God's work.

With all this in mind, we can follow these modern warnings and guidelines in our efforts for Christ and to find the deepest joy that life in faith can bring. We use the challenge from Jesus to the seventy as a model to move boldly into our everyday world, into the lives of those around us – our friends and neighbors, strangers and enemies, skeptics and unbelievers, the bereaved and disconsolate, the poor and victims of injustice, the hopeless and diseased – all who are in need of God. We move forward with courage and commitment in telling others about Christ, bringing them into the life of the Church, welcoming those who come anew into our midst, ministering to all in need, sharing with them what we have, so that they may be healed of their brokenness and find the same joy in the Lord we have found.

Above all, it is necessary to overcome the inherent need to avoid vulnerability. To leave behind fear of failure, the inclination to avoid acting because we are afraid we will be embarrassed or rejected or that it will be too time-consuming or too difficult or costly. We must grasp life with joy in Christ and seize the opportunity to be among the seventy for our generation.

We must go about this task with verve and commitment and excitement and joy. We will do well to emulate a bunkhouse-full of Texas cowboys who once said, "We loved working cattle so much that we would be awake in the night crying for daylight so we could saddle up and hit the range." Can we, too, cry for daylight so we can get to work tending to the call of Christ to reach out to the world in love and sharing?

If we go at our task in this way, following a modern expression of the work of the seventy, we are certain to experience the same deep, meaningful, fulfilling joy found by our forebears in the faith. Not a superficial kind of happiness or delight, but the joy that takes root deep down in our hearts.

Can singing “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy” be an appropriate and affirming response to what we experience in the committed Christian life? Can it serve as a statement of Christian hope and faith that helps us remember that grace and love underlie the foundation of God’s relationship with us and God’s power and support as we go about our Christian ministries?

A final link for us with the seventy of old and Jesus’ instruction to them is found in his sending them out two by two. Like them, none of us acts alone in carrying out the mission and ministries of the Body of Christ. We are all in this together, and we take comfort in the partnerships we share in carrying out Christ’s charge to us as the seventy of this generation.

So there is no “I” but only “we.” Therefore, let us take to heart the words of the old camp song in the deepest and most meaningful understanding of joy, changing its words from “I” to “we” and “my” to “our.” Sing with me, won’t you?

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Down in our hearts (Where?)
Down in our hearts
We’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy
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Down in our hearts to stay*

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