

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
July 4, 2010

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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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."

(Luke 10:8-9 N.R.S.V.)

The Kingdom of God has Come Near

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

"The Rev. Mr. Jones rode into town with the keys of the kingdom dangling invisibly at his side." I can't remember where I read that sentence or who wrote it. But years later I still remember it. I remember it not only because it painted such a great picture in my imagination, but also because it called to life something within me. "The Rev. Mr. Jones rode into town with the keys of the kingdom dangling invisibly at his side."

That sentence came back to me as I was studying our text for today because in that text Jesus gives the keys to the kingdom, not just to Peter, not just to the original 12 disciples, but also to 70 others. He gave them the keys to the kingdom and sent them out to do his work. He told them to perform acts of mercy and healing and to proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near.

This is such a great text, it is full of good news for us today. Because Jesus did not stop giving out keys to the kingdom with those 70. He is still calling men and women, boys and girls today to do his work, to spread his love, to heal, and to proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near. As you leave here today, the keys to the kingdom can be dangling by your side, ready to be used.

Now when I refer to the kingdom of God, I'm not just talking about some future event that will happen after you die. The kingdom of God is already among us. Wherever God is worshiped, wherever God's love is shared, wherever the good news is proclaimed- there is the kingdom of God. It is true that in this life we catch only glimpses of the kingdom. But it is already among us, and we get to be part of it even here, even now, and forever!

This is exciting stuff! Think about what it means that we have been entrusted with the keys to the kingdom of God. First of all it means that Jesus Christ believes in you. Second it means that you have an opportunity to invest in the kingdom. Third it means that you get to witness and to experience the joy of having the love and power of God flow through you. Wow!

Let's take these one at a time. Jesus Christ believes in you. Now that is a switch. Usually we hear that "You need to believe in Jesus Christ." Well, it is true that you need to believe in Jesus Christ.

It is also true that Jesus Christ believes in you.

Now look, God does not need us to do his work. But he invites us to be part of his work anyway. He makes us co-workers with him. He shows that he believes in us enough to demand great things from us. Let me say that again. God demands great things of us because he believes in us. He believes that with his help we can do incredible things. God already knows that is true, we are the ones that need to experience it.

I was reading about a young man who volunteered to go into the Marines. He gave up an easy life at home and days of carefree fun with his friends for the rigors of basic training and boot camp. What motivated him to do that? Was it his sense of patriotism? His desire to give back something to the land that had given so much to him?

No, those things did not motivate him. He said what propelled him toward the Marines was, "I wanted to be tested. All my life I've gotten by easy. Nobody ever demanded much of me at home or in school. I think that maybe my parents and teachers didn't think I had much ability or talent. I wanted to be somewhere that people believed in me enough to demand big things out of me. I wanted to show what I was made of. That's why I joined the Marines." (Pulpit Resources, April, May, June 2010, pg. 60)

In the same way, our Lord demands sacrifice, service, love from us- big things. Because he believes in us. God knows we have something to offer. And he gives us the opportunity to be tested, to show it.

Our Lord also gives us the keys of the kingdom because he wants us to invest in the kingdom. He wants us to be more than customers, he wants us to be owner-operators.

Again God could have done all the work himself, he is after all, God and all powerful. Instead God calls men and women, boys and girls into his service. He calls us at inconvenient times. He calls us to difficulty, to struggle, to sacrifice for the kingdom. God does this because he knows us so well. God knows that human beings simply do not value anything that costs us nothing.

A prime example of this is the government housing that was built in the 1960's and 70's. In an attempt to better the conditions of the desperately poor. The federal government came in, tore down slums and built beautiful housing complexes in their place. The poor were allowed to move into these places rent free.

In most cases it was a heart breaking disaster. In a very short time all of those nice new homes had been completely wrecked, by the very people who were living in them. They didn't value them or take care of them- in many cases they actively vandalized them.

When Habitat for Humanity came along, they decided that the way to get people to value their homes was to make them invest in the building process. So Habitat for Humanity homes are not free. The people who get those homes have to put in several hundred hours of labor on other homes before they can be considered for their own home. They have to put in even more hours of labor on the

construction of their own home. And then they still have to buy the house. These houses are built with almost all volunteer labor, and much of the material is donated so the cost is much less than a house would otherwise cost. In addition the new home owners are provided with an interest free loan. So it is a pretty good deal. But it is far from free.

Many poor people simply do not qualify for a Habitat Home. So it is not a perfect solution. But here is my point, the overwhelming majority of those who do receive a Habitat Home, take very good care of their houses. They value their houses because they have invested in them.

Now I want to be very clear here. We can invest in the kingdom of God, but we cannot buy our salvation. The forgiveness of our sins is a free gift of God's grace. We can't earn it. We can never deserve it. We can't work our way into it. Only the death of Christ on the cross can save us from the consequences of our sins. That saving, that salvation is offered to us by Christ Jesus without cost. It is totally free.

As an aside, I wonder if that is why so many people in our society treat their salvation so lightly? So many people are completely "ho-hum" about their salvation. They don't really value it because it cost them nothing. Someone else paid the price and gave it to them.

Still once we are in, once our salvation is assured, Jesus gives us a chance to invest in the kingdom. He gives us a chance to carry the keys, to show his love, to carry out his work.

It is hard work, this kingdom work. It is sometimes frustrating, often inconvenient, and demands a willingness to sacrifice way beyond our comfort zone. Yet interestingly enough. The more we give of ourselves, the more we invest in the kingdom of God, the more we come to value it.

The difference between us and the great heroes of the faith is not a matter of talent or ability. It is not even so much a matter of great faith. It is a matter of great investment. They are fully invested in God.

Most of us are not invested all that heavily in God's kingdom. We may sing the words of the hymns, "Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold." But we don't really mean it. At least not yet. We don't mean it in terms of money, and we don't mean it in terms of time. Most of us have a long ways to go, or to put it another way, we have a lot of opportunity for growth. I mean let's face it, we are booked.

We have our commitments, our busy-ness, our work, playing tennis, socializing, tackling the mortgage, striving for a promotion, hauling the kids to soccer. We are not evil; we may even be doing considerable good. But we are pretty much booked.

When it comes to God we say, "Humm. I have five minutes and five dollars left over. I want to be a Christian, so here, God; I'll give you what I've got left." Then we feel fairly noble: "I gave what I had left to God."

The heroes of the faith on the other hand, say, "God, it's all yours. It's all up for grabs. No prior commitment is sacred. Whatever you want me to do with all of my time whatever you want me to

do with all of my energy, whatever you want me to do with all of my possessions, my wealth, whatever it is that I have; God, it's all yours. I hold nothing back."

I don't say this to lay a guilt trip on you. I am pointing out a simple truth. We appreciate and value that which we have invested in. And the more we invest into God's kingdom the more we value the kingdom. The more we invest, the more we get back.

I remember the first time I was asked to teach an adult Sunday School Class. I was in college at the time. And it opened up a whole new world to me. I was amazed at how much more I was getting out of the lessons when I had to study and prepare to teach them. God's word opened up to me in a whole new way. And even after all these years, when I teach a class, there is no doubt in my mind that I get way more out of lessons than the students. I am truly blessed. I am blessed not only because I hear God's word more clearly as I read it over, but I am also blessed in that I hear God's word more clearly in contributions of the class members.

The good news is that even though most of us have lots of room for growth in the area of investing in God's work, God continually supplies us with opportunities to join him in his work. Jesus says in our scripture from Luke, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (V. 2) God knows that we have a need to be harvesters. We have a need to invest ourselves in the kingdom work. So God makes sure that the harvest is always plentiful. There is always work to be done.

This is exciting stuff! Being entrusted with the keys to the kingdom of God means, first that Jesus Christ believes in you. Second it means that you have an opportunity to invest in the kingdom. And third it means that you get to witness and experience the joy of having the love and power of God flow through you. Wow!

For us key carriers it is not all hard work and struggle. Luke tells us that the 70 that Jesus sent out to do mission work returned to him with joy. I think it is fair to say that they returned to him with great joy! They were able to witness and to be part of the power of God at work in the world.

There is such a overwhelming sense of joy and fulfillment in witnessing the power of God touching the lives of people. We have seen that right here at First Church this last week with the work groups. The committee that hosts these groups and gets everything lined up has been putting in the hours. By the time this second group gets done and goes home everyone on the committee will be badly in need of rest. But I don't hear people complaining. What I hear is a growing sense of excitement.

We are touched by the young people who come in here and do this work, by their dedication, by their generosity and love, by their faith in action. And as Mike said the other Sunday, we are also moved by the reactions of those whose homes are being worked on. Some of these people break down in tears because they are so relieved, because they know now that someone does care about what is happening to them, because they experience the love of God first hand. That is a powerful thing!

I can't think of anything more moving, or that brings more joy, than to know that you have been used by God in a powerful way. And we have seen that here at First Church, not just with the work

groups, but in the prayer shawl ministry, in our upcoming Vacation Bible School, in the music that is offered to God each Sunday and in a hundred other ways, both small and large. God is at work here. And we feel his joy!

Jesus called the 12 and he sent them forth to do his work. Jesus called the 70 and he sent them forth to do his work. Jesus calls you, and he sends you forth to do his work. As you go out of this service today, the keys of the kingdom will dangle invisibly from your side. Know that this is a great blessing. It means that Jesus Christ believes in you. It means that you have an opportunity to invest in the kingdom. It means that you get to witness and experience the joy of having the love and power of God flow through you. Wow!

Amen.