

Called And Sent July 8, 2007

Rev. Broadbent:

From the bi-annual National Meeting of the United Church of Christ, the general synod, I bring you this good news. You are not unique. You are not unique, First Congregational Church. Those of us who were there spent five days with people from all over the country — Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Florida — who hold the same hopes and dreams for the Church and for the world that you do. We met people who dance, who sing, who knit, who pray, who march, just like you do. You are not unique.

I know in a world that so highly values individuality, that might not come across as exactly a compliment. But I believe that it is something to rejoice in. That said, you are known, loved, and appreciated. On various occasions, as I was talking to this person or that person and doing the introductions, I would mention that I was from Colorado Springs and that I served a church there. I would receive responses like, “A UCC Church?” “Yes, a UCC.” “Which one?” “First Congregational UCC.” “Oh, I’ve heard of that church.”

One person in particular, Nancy Taylor, the pastor at Old South Church in Boston, said, “We are so grateful that your church is in Colorado Springs.” We have a particular role to play here, to play in this context, which can so often be dominated by very loud voices that can be somewhat narrow, that can insist on their own way. And we are an inspiration to other UCC churches, a reminder to them that they also are not unique.

Among the many wonderful experiences I had at the general synod was the opportunity to hear the person who will be our 2008 James W. White lecturer in May — Walter Brueggemann. Walter Brueggemann is a name that you are going to hear more and more over the coming year. If you have already heard of him, then you probably know that he is one of the foremost Biblical scholars in the country, if not the world. And he claims the UCC as his home church.

Of the many, many incredible, wonderful things that he said in his talk, he warned about the inclination that the Church, the whole Church has of domesticating the text, domesticating the Biblical text, taking something that is wild and unruly, that speaks of a different world and a different possibility and rather making it palatable, comfortable, prosaic, and affirming of what we already know to be true. Brueggemann claimed that this text, in fact, has the power to claim us and to change us, if we let it. If we allow ourselves to be situated within it, if we stop pretending that we have a greater claim on it than it has upon us. He said that both conservatives and liberals fall into this temptation of domesticating the text.

Conservatives domesticate the text by turning, in his words, fidelity into certitude. That is taking that which can only be known by trusting it and turning it into something that is ultimately rationally affirmed and known with certainty, with certitude, and may not be questioned.

Called And Sent
July 8, 2007

Liberals, for their part, domesticate the text by pretending that everybody is her or his own pope and claiming, “Well, whatever you make of it, that’s what’s true for you.” I think that is the harder one for our Church to hear, because we tend to affirm that each person has an individual way and individual ideas, and we need to support that and affirm that.

But this text is not going to be boxed in by what each one of us wants it to mean. If we trust it, it just might have the power to bring us together in a way that we would never devise on our own — to transform us in a way that we would never be able to affect by our own initiative.

So in an effort not to domesticate this text, I want to suggest what I think is the most difficult part of this lectionary. That is the problem of “call.” The mission of the 70 — it only appears in the Gospel of Luke. Matthew, Mark, and John do not include it. They all do, however, include some version of the sending of the 12, but Luke alone includes the sending of the 70.

What could this mean? Well, first of all, Luke is drawing upon the accounts from the Book of Numbers, in which Moses first calls, commissions, and sends the 12 leaders of the 12 tribes. Then later on, 70 elders were called, commissioned, and sent out.

Luke picks up on this, I believe, because it is Luke’s particular message to say that this Gospel word, this good news, is not just to be shared with the group that is already in but it must go, must go to the ends of the earth. Luke is saying this is not something — our message is not the message for an elite club. It is a message that is good news for everyone.

As hard as it may be for us to accept, I think one of the messages that this text is giving us is that we are called to evangelize. I know some of you shuddered when I said that. This word, evangelical, comes from the Greek word, the root meaning good news. To be evangelical at its most basic is to share the good news.

This is not too far from us and from our tradition. After all, one of the fir [?] branches that came together in 1957, to form the United Church of Christ, was the evangelical church. And yet I know, in this milieu that we find ourselves in Colorado Springs, we so often want to separate ourselves from “them,” from those who take on the title of “evangelical.” But we should not give it up so quickly. Because if it is truly good news, we have to share it.

What does that mean? I think Jesus’ instructions to the 70 actually might break open and challenge what we already think it might mean to share the good news. So take what that means to you so far. Do not throw it away. Just set it aside for a moment and hear Jesus’ words.

Called And Sent

July 8, 2007

First of all, to do this is dangerous. He says, “It is like you are lambs, and I’m sending you out into a pack of wolves.” Is this overstated? We are not called to go and do what is comfortable, what comes natural, what kind of is in the moment fulfilling. We are called to do what is difficult and strange and even scary. It makes me think that as it seems like the Christian influence over our society wanes, it is actually a good thing. We should thank God that it is once more odd to be Christian, because that which we do is not going to be easy. Also, it is not going to be something we do as individuals. This is not about self-improvement. It is not about finding yourself. This is about finding a companion and together sharing that good news with a world in desperate need.

Neither is it insistent. As we are sent, we are not to go and insist that a person do this or that for us. Rather, we are to be gracious. That going, being called, and being sent has much to do with being able to receive the hospitality of others. I think that is a little different. We are to receive whatever food is put in front of us, whatever opportunity is put in front of us.

Jesus tells the 70 that this work they are to do requires simplicity and trust. So often in our culture we rely on our “stuff” to give us strength or confidence. We believe that what we are wearing or what we own or what we drive or where we live is somehow going to give us some kind of favor in the eyes of others. Jesus says, “Forget all that. You don’t need the cell phone. You don’t need the PowerPoint. You don’t even need to figure out exactly what you’re going to say so it’s some compelling message. Just find another person and go. Wear what you’re wearing.” I think He is saying, “Be yourself. At your core, be yourself.”

Okay, so we are called and we are sent. But what is it that we are supposed to do or say? This is perhaps the thing that we are most scared about in this commissioning. Yet the text says, “Go and offer peace. Go and say, ‘Peace to all of you in this house.’” That is not trying to get somebody else to think exactly the way you do, trying to get somebody else to join your particular part of the club, trying to convince someone else why their ways are flawed. No. We are called and sent to offer peace. Then stop talking. If your peace is going to go out, it is going to go out. If it is going to come back to you, it is going to come back to you. Either way, your response shall be, “The kingdom of God has come near.”

In some of the versions of this text, there is a little hint of judgment. In Meg’s reading, it had to do with shaking the dust off your shoes. In the NSRV it says, “Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you.” I think sometimes we bristle at that sense of judgment. I do not know if this helps you, but it does help me. Whenever there is a word of judgment that makes me respond, I immediately apply the word “urgency.” When things tend to be urgent, we tend to be very clear and very direct about what is the case.

I got a call — I don’t know how long ago it was, maybe a year — someone was “concerned” that “we” as a Church, inviting people of every sexual orientation, race, ability, were contributing in sending people to hell. “Doesn’t that bother you?” this caller

Called And Sent
July 8, 2007

asked. I said, "It doesn't bother me. What bothers me is that you might be sending people to hell now by keeping God's love from them." That is urgency. That is an urgent message that the world needs to hear, and we are called and sent to offer it. Regardless of how the world responds, our response shall be, "The kingdom of God has come near." The kingdom of God has come near. The peace of God has come near, and I do not care if you are old or young, if you are a child or a teen, if you are a parent or a retiree, your message to the world is, "The kingdom of God has come near." And this is, in this day, an urgent message, and we, the Church, are called and sent to offer just that.

Amen.