

Sermon by Donald W. Sjoberg  
Augustana Heritage Association Gathering 2008  
Luke 10:17-20

TEMPERED JOY

The seventy returned with joy! They had accomplished their mission of announcing Jesus visit and the coming kingdom of God. They had overcome the demons in their own fears, as well as faced the opposition surrounding them. Now, they had stories to share and successes to celebrate. And, I expect, Jesus listened to them - for a while.

I recall times when congregational visitors returned to tell of their visits. Remember the Preaching - Teaching - Reaching Missions which including visitation teams? Remember causes such as the Advance for Christ Appeals? Those who visited were pleased that they had made the effort, relieved to have been well received, sometimes surprised by the generous responses. In a few instances it seemed as though the visits were providential as pastoral needs were made known.

Pastor Robert Ek (Class of '56) told of door to door calling as a mission developer. One day when coming to a home he was welcomed by a woman who said, "I prayed this morning that God would send someone to visit me. You are the answer to my prayer. Come in." Such visits kept him going door to door with purpose and resolve.

It is important to mark accomplishments and successes. We do with our families, our congregations, our communities, our schools, our sport teams, our countries. Retired pastors recall the good old days in the church. We seniors enjoy telling what it was like when we were young. And our children remind us that they have heard it all before!

"When I was your age" is how we often begin a story when we want to reminisce. Walking to school with my granddaughter and her children, I began talking about walking two miles to a country school in all kinds of weather, and would have shared more but one of the other mother's interrupted, saying, "I have heard that before, from my grandparents, and it was two miles up hill both ways, against the wind, and 40 below!"

It was well timed squelch and not the first time for me. On one other occasion I had driven Trudy's Civic to a country congregation and noticed the big difference in the gas used compared to my 8 cylinder car. After church I had to keep telling how little gas I had used until a farmer with typical Danish humour said, "You better hurry out there and let some of the gas out."

Jesus tempers the joy of the disciples by cautioning them to be careful how they handle their successes and failures, for such may either lead to self satisfaction or despair. The disciples were to be centred in Christ's victory over the forces of evil and the powers of death, and in his continuing presence with them.

Jesus said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven and have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions." Jesus must have shown joy as he used the familiar Biblical imagery to speak of victory over the forces of evil. We sing that victory in the Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is Our God": "Though hordes of devils fill the land all threat'ning to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand, they cannot overpower us."

We will understand these words from different experiences of the demons named, overcome, and the kingdom of God announced.

At one of the services at the ELCIC constituting convention, the Rev. Becki Larson, now Executive Director of the ELCA Division of Church in Society, described the time she was diagnosed with an illness and was reluctant to talk about it. But when she was able to share with others and give it a name her anxiety went away, and “the little demons scurried away into their caves.” Becki’s challenge to us was to enter into God’s mission by naming the darkness in the situations of life where the kingdom of God breaks in and where God’s presence is known.

God keeps moving on and calling of the church to follow, to keep venturing out. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, in his book “Where God Dwells”, writes “The church is always renewed from the edges rather than from the center.” The words reminded me of Dr. Ted Matson, a mentor for me, who wrote a book about mission entitled, “On the Edge of the Edge.”

We know of venturing in mission from Augustana’s history and there are many people who are remembered and cherished by the children of Augustana. I thought of this on the way to Lindsborg when we stopped at Wahoo, Nebraska, where my cousin had been a student at Luther College. We walked with her around the abandoned buildings as she tried to remember what it was like. But she knew what it had been. It was a school which welcomed her coming from Canada, and a community where she spend her first Christmas away from home.

I saw a marker showing the date of the college founding - 1883. That was the year the patriarch of Augustana, T. N. Hasselquist came to Winnipeg, Canada, to contact immigrant Swedes. It was a visit which led the way for others who came to begin the work of Augustana in Canada, including my home congregation. In many ways we are connected in mission as children of Augustana.

To the disciples, Jesus said “You have been given authority to announce the kingdom and you are citizens of that kingdom.” What is important is what God is doing through them, even more than what they think they are doing for God. Though the 70 had every reason to celebrate their successes and accomplishments, Jesus tempered their joy by pointing to something greater which is not dependent on successes or diminished by failures. His words were: “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Our names are written in city ledgers, country citizenship records, baptismal records and, for some of the us clergy, in the book of the Augustana Ministerium with our own signatures. In a similar way we are assured of citizenship in the kingdom through Jesus and the One Holy Catholic Church.

Our citizenship in the kingdom is lived out as we gather for worship, share the good news of Jesus Christ, work for peace and justice, and minister to human need. This is living in the covenant of our baptism.

Vergil Anderson, class of '58, told of an unusual request for baptism which came from a single mom who was traveling through the town with her baby. While it was an unusual request to have the baptism done immediately, he agreed and the child was baptized. Some five years later he was in his office and heard someone enter the church. Looking in, he saw the same woman at the baptismal font telling her son that this was the place where he had been baptized. He was a Christian, a member of the Church. He belonged.

We have places and people, buildings, congregations, baptisms, confirmations, marriages and funerals which helps us in our faith journeys and connect us to our spiritual heritage. It is said that life is lived forwards and understood backwards. We are part of something greater flowing from the past into the future. There are those precious memories in worship, grace centred times, when we see a little more clearer the proper relationship of the old and the new.

Einar Billing, a Swedish pastor, in a commentary on the Cana wedding feast wrote: "The old out of which no longer anything new grows is but a heavy burden. It is dead. The new which does not at least sink a root tendril into the old can only delude and destroy. It withers away and becomes old and dies. But when from the old the new comes forth, when new tasks are born out of older work, when new riches are revealed in ancient thought - then there is life, as it ought to be. Then life is really life!"

So may it continue to be for us, Children of Augustana. Thanks be to God!