

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 66: 10 – 14

Psalm 66: 1 – 8

Galatians 6: (1 – 6) 7 – 16

Luke 10: 1 – 11, 16 – 20

The day that I graduated from college, I was also commissioned as an Ensign in the United States Navy. Holding up my right hand, I swore to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. My father, a retired U. S. Army Major, pinned my gold bars – butter bars, as we call them in the Navy – onto my collar points. It was a symbol of my neophyte rank in the Military. I was entitled to wear a different uniform than I had during the four years of NROTC, and I was now expected to go serve in a totally different capacity. Like many new college graduates, I had a couple of pieces of paper to my name, but very little direct training for what I would actually be doing, and even less confidence that I would *know* what I was to be doing. Being in training, or college, or graduate school, or seminary is one thing. Being out in the real world, putting that learning to good, practical use, is something else altogether. But, I had a commission [Commissioning conveys authority and responsibility, and it involves sending.] and so I departed, orders and seabag in hand, trusting that I would learn what I needed to know and that I could grow into my mission as a military officer.

I could easily tell the same story about seminary and being ‘commissioned’ (or ordained) to be out in the real world as a priest. Most of you could probably echo with your similar experiences, thoughts and sentiments. In our lifetimes, we experience this ‘being sent’ more than once. Not only with vocations in the secular world, but here in the church as well. Throughout the church year, we commission various ministers within the church – LEMs, Sunday School and Youth leaders, Vestry members, etc. We commission people because we, as different parts of the Body of Christ, are entrusting some special duty to each of these people. We’re authorizing them to act, in the name of this congregation (and, in the bigger picture, in the name of God) to do something in particular. But in reality, while we have special liturgies for each of these commissionings, all of us are commissioned every time we celebrate the Eucharist.

We sing a processional hymn (or we simply process at the 8:15 service) at the beginning of our service as we proceed to worship and praise God for what God has done, is doing and will do for us. We sing a processional hymn (or simply process out) at the end of the service because we are not staying here! No, we are processing from God’s house out into the world, just like the seventy whom Jesus sends in today’s Gospel reading from Luke. We process out into *our* community, *our* mission field, just as they go to the surrounding villages, to make way for the coming of Christ. Think of each of us commissioned as ‘frequent fliers’ for the Gospel, sent here and there in our daily rounds. This sacred space is merely a layover each week, a place to ground ourselves, to be refreshed and renewed, to be strengthened for service. Then we are sent back out into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit, or in the name of Christ, to love and serve the Lord!

Sunday after Sunday, we well-trained Episcopalians do not leave our pews until we have heard the dismissal, to which of course we heartily respond, “Thanks be to God!” – usually with two or three alleluias after it. We are not dismissed to just ‘mill about smartly’ as we used to say in the Navy. We are commissioned, sent out as agents, to do the work we have been given to do. Which is to proclaim and thereby to heal, and to heal and thereby proclaim, the Good News of God in Jesus, and the Kingdom of God.

Knowing how *we* feel at these moments of sending (perhaps excited but uncertain), imagine how the seventy feel as Jesus sends them out. This is actually a second sending in Luke's Gospel. At the beginning of the previous chapter, Jesus sends out the Twelve to preach and to heal. Jesus doesn't give the 12 any further instruction on how to do it, he just sends them. Now, Jesus is commissioning 70 others. More and more disciples are moving from merely being followers of the Gospel to being providers of the Gospel. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word for listen also conveys the idea of following through on. To hear the Gospel is to *do* the Gospel. Or better yet, perhaps, to *BE* the Gospel. Out of the crowds which have been following Jesus, there are some who are moving from simply observing to acting upon. It is becoming a shared ministry between Jesus and all of Jesus' disciples.

We don't know much about these 70 people. They are probably both men and women, since men aren't supposed to speak to unrelated women in public and since many of Jesus' followers and providers *are* women. We don't know that these 70 people are extraordinary in any way. They probably have no experience with marketing or PR campaigns. Most likely, none of them hold advanced degrees in Biblical studies, ethics or liturgy. Nobody is singled out for their piety or outstanding character or sinlessness. Luke makes no mention of them being gifted orators or even being extroverts. As far as we know, they are just 70 average people on whom Jesus calls to share in the on-going revelation of God to the world. Seventy normal, everyday people. People pretty much like you and me, ready to share in the responsibilities of the Jesus movement.

Jesus doesn't give these 70 much more instruction than he did with the twelve. Just a bit of a travel advisory. Against the perils and wolves of this world, they will be armed only with the authority with which Jesus commissions them and the strength of working in pairs. The disciples are to leave home without their American Express card, as well as without a change of clothes or even shoes. Jesus tells them that their mission is so important and so urgent that they are not even to be detained by the niceties of everyday etiquette when meeting strangers on the way. They are to share the peace of the Lord, unless it is not received. They are not to see where they can get the best food and lodging deal. They shouldn't worry about the issues of ritual defilement; they are to eat whatever is placed in front of them. And if they are not received well, just as Jesus has not always been well received, they are to let go and let God by shaking the dust of that town from their sandals and moving on. With those words of sending, Jesus then shoos the 70 out of the nest. Go! Now! Be on your way! So the disciples spread out across the countryside, sharing the God they know through what they have seen and heard in Jesus. Rather like John the Baptist, they make a way in the wilderness for him.

There is a Jewish tradition that before each of us goes a cadre of angels (messengers, evANGELism) crying, "Make way for the image of God!" That is what we are supposed to be doing for Jesus in this world. Only, so often, many of us feel very ill-equipped to do so. We often feel that we will not find the right words to properly convey God's message. We fear that we don't know enough or will step on someone's toes if we talk about who God is for us. We don't like the language that is so often associated with, OMG, the "E" word – evangelism. We do not want to be Mormons on bikes or Jehovah's Witnesses on someone's doorstep. But the good news is that we don't have to worry about any of that. To witness (a very un-Episcopalian word) to God's mercy and grace doesn't always have to be about words, or not primarily about words, but rather about actions. Paul writes in today's passage from his letter to the Galatians, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Note that, just as with the 12, Jesus doesn't ever give the 70 instructions on *how* to go before him, *how* to evangelize. The message from both Jesus and Paul is that who we are is so much more than what we say. Our chief witness to Jesus is always who we are. Jesus also doesn't teach his disciples (us)

how to evangelize because Jesus teaches us how to pray. And in the end, that is all we really need. Because it isn't us, it is God who is at work in and through us.

Jesus calls 70 average people, knowing full well that they are finite and fallible, very *human* beings without all the answers and without even all the questions. But Jesus also knows that these are people who are open to the power of God working in them that which is pleasing in God's sight. Jesus chooses us for the very same reason. Jesus tells the 70 and us to pack light because it's time to travel. It's oh-so-tempting to stay where it's comfortable and familiar, talking to people who already speak the same language as lambs among lambs and let the wolves fend for themselves. But that is not what discipleship is all about.

Shared ministry, commissioning, sending is what discipleship is all about. Jean Pierre de Caussade once remarked that "our task is to offer ourselves up to God like a clean, smooth canvas and not bother ourselves about what God may choose to paint on it, but, at every moment, feel only the stroke of God's brush." To be commissioned for the Gospel is to let God paint however God wants to paint on our canvases and to go around, revealing that artist to the world.

I'd like to close with a prayer from Kathy Galloway of the Iona Community (*in Coracle 3, no. 11* copywrite Iona Community, 1992, from *Resources for Preaching and Worship, Year C*). Let us pray:

Our brother Jesus, you set our feet upon the way and sometimes where
you lead we do not like or understand.

Bless us with courage where the way is fraught with dread or danger;

bless us with graceful meetings where the way is lonely;

bless us with good companions where the way demands a common cause;

bless us with night vision where we travel in the dark, keen hearing where

we have not sight, to hear the reassuring sounds of fellow travelers;

bless us with humour – we cannot travel lightly weighed down with gravity;

bless us with humility to learn from those around us;

bless us with decisiveness where we must move with speed;

bless us with lazy moments, to stretch and rest and savour;

bless us with love, given and received;

and bless us with your presence, even when we know it in your absence;

Lead us into exile,

until we find that on the road

is where you are,

and where you are is going home.

Bless us, lead us, love us,

bring us home bearing the Gospel of life. Amen. +