

Sermon Preached June 29, 2014
Year A, Proper 8
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight,
oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The night my family arrived in Lithuania, for our three year mission, was hot and steamy. We were in Eastern Europe as missionaries for the Episcopal Church. As we later learned, “hot and steamy” are two words never associated with Lithuania as the rest of our time there was bitterly cold. But that night was an unusual summer evening, as we disembarked from a utilitarian cargo ship in the port of Klaipeda, after an interminable 24 hour trip across the Baltic. It was 10:00 at night and we had our two small children with us, ages 2 and 6, as well as 14 pieces of luggage and no assistance hauling everything and everybody off the boat. We were hot and sweaty and grumpy. The kids were tired and whiny. The luggage was heavy. Air conditioning and deodorant had yet to be discovered by the locals. We didn't know who we would meet or what to expect once we got through customs. We didn't know where we were in the city, we didn't know where we were supposed to go, and we didn't know the language.

All of a sudden, like a cool drink on a hot day, we were greeted by the one person we knew in the entire country, Steve, the man who had recruited us to leave our comfortable lives and move abroad. He brought a young man from the university with him and they helped us carry our stuff through customs, and into a waiting van. They drove us through the dark to the other end of the city where we were brought to our apartment which had been prepared for us.

There were sheets on the beds and food in the refrigerator. It made us feel like we had come home. By this time it was after 11:00 pm. We were tired and overwhelmed, but being welcomed with such love and thoughtfulness at the end of a grueling journey was a great joy and comfort.

Our gospel lesson this morning is rather brief and obscure, especially when read out of context, but it is about what it is to go out as a missionary and what it means to welcome missionaries. Earlier in the chapter Jesus gathers the 12 disciples and give them instructions before sending them out on a mission trip. He tells them to “proclaim the good news ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near’” [Mt 10:7]. Along the way he wants them to cure the sick. He warns them that the journey will be difficult, they will be persecuted, and that they are like sheep sent into the midst of wolves. Then he says a bunch of other stuff concluding with today’s passage about the rewards for those who welcome the disciples and their message.

These days we have the saying, “Don’t shoot the messenger.” In other words, we can’t hold the messenger accountable for the message. But in the time of Christ, there was a sense that a messenger is, in fact, a representative of the one who sends him. The messenger is to be treated as if he were the sender of the message.¹ That is why Jesus tells the disciples “whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” In other words, how people treat the disciples with Jesus’ message about the coming Kingdom, is equivalent to how they treat God. Even something as small as a cup of water to show hospitality and welcome is meaningful because in the end, it is in support of the Kingdom of God.

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Mission-Trip-Guidelines-from-Jesus-Alyce-McKenzie-06-20-2011?offset=2&max=1>

But what does that mean for us? Most of us aren't being sent out to villages like the disciples, or to Lithuania for that matter. We aren't missionaries and we don't know any missionaries to help. Or do we?

I would suggest that all of us are missionaries and the advice given by Jesus to the disciples is meant for us all. We are all missionaries for the Kingdom, and we all are to welcome those who come in the name of God. Being a missionary has nothing to do with leaving the country, or even leaving the North Shore. It is about being a messenger for God's love and the Kingdom that is to come. As you know, when Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God it isn't simply about going heaven when we die. He is speaking about God's reign on earth. That reality which has begun with Jesus, is continuing with us, but won't reach its fulfillment until the end time. We are all missionaries when we preach the Kingdom with or without words. You are a missionary for the Kingdom when you help out with Monday Night Suppers, when you volunteer at the Community Shop, when you donate food to Beverly Bootstraps, when you assist with B-Safe, when you shovel the driveway of an elderly person, or when you teach a child how to pray. These are all Kingdom activities.

One of the very important ways to proclaim the Kingdom is by directly inviting people to church, or having a heart to heart with another about your spiritual life and hopes and fears about God. I know, I know! We are a bunch of reserved New Englanders and this is a scary thing to do. But the world and the church's place in it has changed dramatically in the past 20 years. In the past, we could sit back and be assured that folks, newcomers, would walk through our doors on a regular basis. While this still does happen at St. John's, the numbers are much fewer

than in years past, and in many churches it has stopped altogether. Many people in our country feel “spiritual, but not religious.” Many think church is about morality and not about God. Many have never stepped foot inside a church, and yet have a deep hunger for knowing the Almighty, although perhaps don’t have words to articulate it. Like the disciples, if we want to proclaim the Kingdom, it won’t happen by waiting patiently in the sanctuary for people to come to us, it will happen when we go out and engage the world with the love of God. This is not about forcing or guilt-tripping people with religion, but an invitation to join us, which they are welcome to accept or reject. It is about relationship. It is about inviting people to church and authentically sharing our own faith journey. It is about going out and illustrating that God’s Kingdom has begun, no matter how shaky and unfulfilled it may seem sometimes. Because when we LIVE it, when we inhabit the Kingdom in our own lives and actions and conversations right now, regardless of what happens around us, God’s realm becomes real and tangible. People see that. In all these ways all of you are missionaries and are being sent out into the world, and sometimes it will be like, what Jesus told his disciples, that you are like sheep in the midst of wolves. Not everyone will like your message. Not everyone will welcome you. Because Jesus preaches a radical love, and not everyone can hear it. It can be too frightening. For instance, most people can appreciate going to a soup kitchen to feed hungry children, but not everyone can appreciate the need to love our enemies, or advocate for the disenfranchised. Lots of Kingdom actions are the sorts of things which will make you very UN-welcome to some. Consider the people who hid Jews in Germany during WWII and smuggled them to safety. Consider those who marched for civil rights in the 60s. Consider those who fought for gay rights in the 80s, 90s, and still do. “Receiving disciples of Jesus, prophets of God, and righteous people may put us at odds with the world and its values.”² Part of Jesus’ message to the disciples includes the difficult words we heard last week,

² <http://www.anthonibrobinson.com/reading.htm>

“Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” [Mt 10:34]. Jesus is not advocating violence, but he is warning the disciples that their message is powerful and will not be universally accepted.

So the message we hear in today’s gospel is the flip side of this, telling them that when they ARE in fact accepted, there will be rewards for those who hear the message and welcome them. When they and their message are welcomed, it will be as though Jesus himself is welcomed. The Kingdom is coming that much closer.

There are three points to be made: 1) Jesus is telling us that we all are missionaries whenever we proclaim God’s Kingdom in word or deed. Some will accept us, some won’t, but as Christians we are called to live as though God’s reign were a present reality and invite others to join us.

2) And then when our message is heard and we are welcomed because of it, those people will be blessed, because they too are participating in Kingdom life. I certainly knew I was experiencing a taste of Kingdom living when I got off the boat in Lithuania and was welcomed into a lovely home with food in the fridge. In the same way, when others hear you invite them to church or see you serve the needy, they may respond to your message with welcome and find their relationship with God deepened as a result.

And finally, 3) we too are to welcome the prophet and the righteous who come to us. Bearing in mind that those who come in the name of righteousness may offer a message that is

hard for us to hear. May the Almighty help us to hear it, respond to it, and welcome the messenger as though they were Jesus himself.

Amen.