

(Psalms 30:11-12 NRSV) Call to Worship

¹¹ You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, ¹² so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

(Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 NRSV)

¹ After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ² He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. ³ Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴ Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵ Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' ⁶ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷ Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸ Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹ cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' ¹⁰ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ¹¹ 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'

¹⁶ "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." ¹⁷ The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" ¹⁸ He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. ¹⁹ See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. ²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

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Keep It Simple, and Your Eye on the Prize

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20.

Throughout her life my mother has always been a very religious person. However, as many times as I have read this morning's passage before, I confess had never noticed what I should have all along. My mother's mealtime eating instructions came right out of the Bible, right from Jesus' lips. Twice in the space of but two verses Jesus instructs his disciples in eating etiquette as he prepares them for a journey. He tells them about staying as a guest, to eat and drink "whatever they provide you." And in case they missed it the first time, in the next verse he says, "Eat what is set before you."

Those words brought back in a flash images of watery bowls of stewed tomatoes and lumpy, running piles of creamed cauliflower. Over these I would lean with no appetite for them at all. Over me would lean my mother, arms folded, quoting Jesus, it turns out. "You must eat what people put before you," she would say. "I remember when I was in the army nursing corps.," she would continue, her version of ten miles through the snowdrifts, "You ate what they put in front of you, or you didn't eat at all. I'm just preparing you for that. And, also," she would go on, "it is good manners."

One time when she wasn't looking, I slid the creamed cauliflower off the plate and behind the radiator. She spied my clean plate with a look of parental accomplishment and served me an extra big dessert for my good behavior. A little while later, but after dessert was long gone, I got another lecture on manners.

*** As I said, I hadn't realized that my mother's mealtime instructions had been spoken by Jesus before. But a few years ago I learned that they had spiritual significance. I had signed up for a day-long meditation retreat, at which lunch was served. The meditation teacher, Larry Rosenberg, gave us lunchtime instructions, which, then too, sounded like my mother. He said that the food had been especially prepared for us, that it was all that would be available for lunch, and that we should eat what we were given. He went on to say that eating what we were given showed respect and appreciation for those who had made the food.

He went on to say that it was also a matter of discipline and simplicity. Larry told us that most of the time we chase after our preferences, wanting this and not

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wanting that. Those preferences become the focus of our activity and our yearnings. We forget to have respect and appreciation, especially for things we do not prefer. And more than that, the grasping after the things we like and pushing away the things we don't like evolves into a complex life. We chase after things; we push things away; we build things, change things, adjust things, all to accommodate our likes and dislikes. And soon all of this may become the focus of our lives, and more important things may simply get cast aside, or left behind.

We can do that even with eating, get so caught up in the preferences that we miss the point. The next time we have a pot-luck maybe you would try some things you never have before. Maybe look at something you're not so sure of and think of the care that someone in our community put into the dish as a gift for the table. Maybe think of the person thinking, what shall I make? Think of the person gathering the ingredients. Think of the person mixing and pouring and cooking, to make this pot-luck dish. Think of the memories he or she may have had in making it. Maybe her mother used to make it, and she remembers her mother stirring it in the kitchen. Maybe she made it with her own children when they were growing up, and now she makes it for you, because they're gone. Or maybe it's a new discovery that he thought you might appreciate. In any case, it was made for you, with love. And in the end, isn't all of that more important than if you've ever had it before, or if you think you'll like it? And even in this little example, isn't it so much more simple than trying to make sure you get only what you want and plenty of that before someone else takes it all?

In this morning's story, when Jesus sends out the seventy, he sends them out with these eating instructions we have been talking about. And he sends them with several other instructions, which are less mystifying, now that we understand what he's trying to get this large group of disciples to understand. He tells them, "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road." I used to think that Jesus was trying to let the disciples know that following him was austere business. If you work with him, expect to do it with no money, no shoes, no suitcase and no socializing. I thought he was telling people it would be a hard road to follow.

And that may have been a part of it. But whatever self-denial Jesus had in mind, his greater meaning was, again, not to get caught up in the trappings of the trip. Jesus was afraid that if their luggage had impressive logos, if their suits were Amani and their shoes Italian designer that pretty soon they would be comparing garment bags with one another. His worries were justified: recall in another place two of his best and brightest were comparing notes about who might get into the kingdom of heaven. Soon they would be thinking to themselves, "I've got to get one of those fancy bags with the wheels." Soon they would be so worried that American Airlines was going to lose the luggage, that the point of the trip would take a back row seat.

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Jesus was sending the seventy to bring God's peace to the countryside. He was sending them to deliver the promise of the kingdom of God. And he knew that they should keep it simple. That they shouldn't get caught up in the peripheral distractions, like clothes and luggage. And he knew that they shouldn't get caught up in their own preferences and wants. He wanted them to pay attention to those they had come to serve, to eat their food and appreciate their hospitality, to offer them a spiritual gift, and to leave when their work was done. And Jesus knew how easily it could all get off course.

The report back tells us that his instructions worked like a charm. They return and tell him with jubilation, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" They followed his instructions. They kept the luggage light. They ate what was put before them. And to their amazement, nothing stood in their way. Even Jesus seems to get into the mood of the excitement. He responds, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you." It is a great celebration of success. Or at least it is almost.

For the Jesus adds one more, one final caveat. He says, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

*** If one takes up an intensive spiritual practice, one may develop astonishing powers or have ecstatic experiences. You may know of Dr. Herbert Benson. He is the doctor at Harvard Medical School who some years ago became willing to do research to determine if meditation actually created measurable physiological changes in its practitioners. To his great surprise, his early research discovered that people who practiced meditation just ten or twenty minutes a day had lower blood pressure, lowered metabolism rates and experienced less stress. This research led to his first and famous book, *The Relaxation Response*.

Since that time, Benson's research has discovered many other things. He found that hospital patients who were practicing a religious faith or had deep religious belief actually recovered from disease and surgery more quickly and fully than those who did not. In another venue, he found that some Tibetan Buddhist monks could wrap themselves in cold soaking wet blankets in near freezing temperatures and through deep meditation could create body heat that would send water vapor steaming from the blankets and dry them completely. This man of science saw his jaw drop when he could actually witness and measure a miracle happening before his very eyes. What incredible power, it turns out, one can develop in a spiritual practice.

I remember once talking to a meditation teacher about the very powerful and pleasurable state of pure concentration that I had just experienced in prayer. I was ecstatic, so to speak, probably in much the same frame of mind the seventy were

when they reported back to Jesus. I was thrilled because the experience was the most intense spiritual thing I had ever experienced. In addition, I knew that achieving such states was a sign of some achievement. I did my best to feign humility with the meditation teacher, but I could not conceal my pride. I was very proud of myself.

To my great surprise, the teacher said, "I don't want you to think about this experience any more. This is not important." I was nearly devastated, and at first had no idea what she meant. But then she echoed Jesus' words to the seventy. She said, "Spiritual experiences, ecstatic heights, blissful concentration are not what it's all about. What it's all about is what difference the practice makes in your life, in your relationship with others and in your relationship with God. If you become entranced by the experiences of deep prayer for themselves, as delicious and powerful as they are, you will be distracted from the real purpose at hand. The devil can use anything, even your spiritual success to divert you from a spiritual life." And, of course, she was right.

So, the advice is clear. Keep it simple. Don't take a lot more on the journey than you will need. You're apt to get too attached to it and competitive about it, anyway. And it will surely be a distraction. Eat what's on your plate. It's good manners, and it shows respect. It also keeps you from getting too caught up in your preferences and allows you to better appreciate others, and what they do for you. And, when all this works, and it will, don't get distracted by your success. Keep your eye on the prize. The prize isn't spiritual success; it's the ability of spiritual success to lead us to the kingdom of God.

Keep it simple, and your eye on the prize. That's all. Amen.