

Count off by Two's

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 66:10-14; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Don't mind me, I'm just going to count you off by twos . . . two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . . Apparently that's all that needs to be done before you get sent out, like those 70 disciples Jesus sent out to do his work, minister in his name. Oh, Jesus did give a little advice, a heads-up for those 70, now grouped in pairs, as they ventured out to the towns and villages ahead of him. But that truly was about all the prep work the 70 received before they were sent out into the world. Jesus had a task for these 70 to do, but, as Luke tells it, Jesus didn't orient them to the task the way we're most comfortable being oriented, did he? There was no six-week training seminar at a hotel conference room, stale pastries and institutional coffee available in the corner. There was no PowerPoint presentation on the screen, and no manual handed out—no thick stack of paper containing details of their job in fine print, all dressed up in a three-ring binder.

Anyway, where was I in the counting? Oh, yes, two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . . I do hope you're not anxious about the fact that you and I who follow Christ 2,000 years later receive no real training, either. But I can understand if you are anxious. After all, not only are the 70 who are commissioned for ministry offered no comprehensive training, they also apparently have no qualifications to begin with—at least none that we've been made aware of. Seriously—do we read anything of their level of education? Their social background? Do they have a minimum number of years prior experience in a related field? Does Jesus ask for three references? No, we don't read anything about that, and if we consider that Jesus' **12 closest** disciples were for the most part on the lowest rungs of the social, educational, and economic ladder, wouldn't it be probable that the 70 disciples **on the periphery** had even fewer qualifications?

Yet Jesus sends them out, as he sends us out. I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel woefully inadequate to minister in his name. Just what experience do we bring to this work? What's in our background that renders us suitable for the tasks of the kingdom? Do you have a reference recommending you to ministry? Okay, so I have a few years in theological education with a degree from Gettysburg Seminary. What qualifies me to wear this collar? And it isn't this collar I'm worried about trying to fill. It's filling the shoes of Jesus Christ. We're talking about doing good in the face of evil. We're talking about healing hurts and raising up the downtrodden. We're talking about offering forgiveness and compassion. And that's just the tip of the iceberg! He sent 70 folks off to fill those shoes. He's sending us. And those are awfully big shoes to fill.

Maybe we **aren't** "qualified" in the sense we're used to. Did you ever think of that? Maybe you and I bring nothing here but our own imperfect, feeble selves, and God baptizes us into this ministry, pours that baptismal water over us, fills us with a portion of his powerful Spirit, and

then sends us out to speak his name. And maybe he's chosen his imperfect children because, as Jesus tells the 70, the harvest is plentiful—it's huge! The harvest is ready to be brought in, and he needs laborers in the fields. There are people all around us hungering to know God, to experience his love and life, to live in his care, to receive hope and strength, so he's sending us out to meet 'em.

So, to continue . . . two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . . By the way, it won't necessarily be a romp in the park. Like lambs in the midst of wolves, Jesus says. The world is not always accepting or gracious in receiving such ministry. To some we will appear good-hearted, but hopelessly foolish or naïve—our efforts too small and inconsequential for the complexities of life. Others will view us with indifference. Some will eye us warily, and still more will consider our faith stance to be somehow dangerous to the status quo.

Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . . You'd think that, since we have so few qualifications, and we're given so little training, we would at least be permitted the time to prepare for doing Jesus' work in the world. But no, Jesus tells the 70 to travel lightly. Don't try to pack for every possible situation or need. Don't greet people on the road. Now, to bring that into our century and culture—it's not that we shouldn't go out without our wallet or shoes, or that we can't say "Hi" to the neighbors. What Jesus is trying to point out is that it is in our nature, when we are unsure and feeling ill-prepared, to tend to drag our feet a bit. Procrastinate, if you will. Dawdle just long enough so that someone else will do the work. Find every reason in the book not to be a disciple in the world: I'll give more to the church when I get a raise. I'll volunteer once the kids are in school. When I'm retired, there's a lot of stuff I could do to help. Besides, until I take a course or attend a conference on that subject, I'm not really ready to go and do it. Others are certainly more knowledgeable than I—they should handle it. But I have every intention of doing it . . . someday.

Jesus apparently doesn't listen to those kinds of excuses. He kept right on talking to the 70, immediately moving on to what exactly it was they were to do. Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . . When you enter a house, says Jesus . . . when you meet up with a person in your workplace, when an acquaintance says something and it suddenly becomes apparent there is ministry to be done, here is what you are to offer: *Peace to this house!* That's Jesus' advice.

Now, of course we won't be using just those four words in all situations, but the essence of what they convey to someone is what you and I will be saying and doing. We will offer God's peace, God's vision of wholeness and healing and goodness to another human being. It will take many, many forms. Perhaps it is opening that wallet that you brought along for the journey. Perhaps it is using your hands, your legs, your brain power, your muscles to repair something or finish a project for someone because they can't do it themselves, or afford it themselves. Perhaps it is listening to another person's story, your willingness to enter their pain and strive to understand them. (And perhaps, once their story has been told, you can talk about the possibility of forgiveness and new life.) Perhaps a form of God's peace is praying with and for someone, and promising continual prayer when you are apart. Perhaps it is sharing your faith with them—what Jesus Christ has done, what he means to you, and why you strive to follow him. Perhaps it is inviting them to worship. All I know is we'll never be offering God's peace in the same way every time. Ministry in Christ's name isn't some robotic, mindless mantra to repeat again and

again. Each opportunity is its own wonderful, challenging moment in time—God’s restorative time with us and the people we meet. And if each time is its own, that means we just never **know** what specific work of the kingdom we’re going to do. Which is scary. I can feel the anxiety level rising again . . . Perfectly normal. A Presbyterian pastor named Patrick Willson described the experience of one of his church elders who often visited parishioners in the hospital. One day, that elder entered the room of a set of new parents—they’d given birth to a child with Downs Syndrome. He didn’t feel prepared to say anything of much value or help. As he told his pastor the next day, “I didn’t know what to say. They let me hold her and I told them she was beautiful . . .” Then he prayed, and he thanked God for the birth of their child and asked God’s peace and blessing on their family.

A few weeks later, the church elder showed his pastor a note he’d received from that young mother. She thanked him for his visit and prayer, and finished her note with these words: “Thank you for not saying what so many people said and telling us how sorry you were. We are so happy to have our baby. Thank you for sharing our family’s joy.”

So here was a man who didn’t exactly know what to say. Unqualified, without preparation, feeling just a bit unsure and awkward, and then, then offering the peace of God to that home. Saying what most needed to be said. Filling Christ’s big shoes.

Oh, and in case you were wondering about that bit about going out in pairs—remember that advice? Yes, the church elder was all alone with that young family in the hospital. Except notice he did talk with his own pastor about his experience, reveal his concerns and anxiety, receive assurance and encouragement from his pastor, and then share his joy at the results. Why do you think Jesus sent his 70 out in pairs, except to do just that? You and I always need each other to talk over our issues of discipleship, share our fears, receive encouragement, and rejoice together.

Okay, onward and upward . . . two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . . Question: Suppose a household you reach doesn’t receive what you have to offer? That’s not beyond the realm of possibility. Jesus told the 70 to proclaim that the kingdom of God was coming near. And that the proclamation was still true, even if the person to which it was proclaimed didn’t want to hear it, turned a deaf ear. God’s presence breaking into the world isn’t stopped just because someone doesn’t believe it. In fact, our very going into the world and living out that peaceable kingdom demonstrates just how near it is.

Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . . I guess it’s important to note, and maybe you’ve already figured this one out, but you and I need to return here regularly, in order to be sent out again. Our gathering for worship of our crucified and risen Lord nourishes and renews, offers forgiveness and strength, teaches us of the glory of the kingdom that’s coming and then assures us we have a place in that kingdom. Best of all, gathering here brings us back into Jesus’ presence where he reminds us of his teachings, gives us his advice—those are the things that make us ready to go and serve. The 70 came back to Jesus and they were filled with joy at what had happened as they went about the towns and villages. And they needed to talk to Jesus about it. For they recognized the healing that had come to broken people through their words and deeds. Then Jesus listened to them, and affirmed their work. He told them he saw evil being

overcome by good in the ministry they performed. He knew that his power had been unleashed in them to bring signs of God's kingdom right to the doorsteps of the people. Those small deeds they did were no small thing after all.

Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen . . .

I am grateful for Jesus' words to the 70 (and to us). His words are wonderful advice, and now I have to ask—having heard his words, are you less anxious and instead more eager? Are you less cynical and instead more hopeful? Will you leave this place rejoicing that you are both a child bound for heaven **and** a partner with God in his mission to the world? **AMEN.**