

“Today is....”: A Sermon for Sunday, July 4

Luke 10:1-20

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Today is the Fourth of July, and today is the Lord's Day.

It happens like this every few years, when the American national holiday *par excellence* lands on a Sunday, the sacred day of worship, when the waving of flags intermingles with the carrying of crosses, when the aroma of hamburgers sizzling on summer grills blends with the fragrance of candles and incense, and when the sound of fireworks merges with the tones of the *Agnus Dei* and “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

For some congregations, of course, this is a happy convergence, a welcome and untroubled opportunity to wear flag lapel pins, to sing “God Bless America” and “America the Beautiful,” to give thanks to God for the grace of living in a land so free and prosperous, and to hear sermons on “proclaim liberty throughout the land” (Lev. 25:10).

But for many other Christians, Sunday and American Independence Day lie together less easily. The cross and the flag are both demanding symbols, and they compete for our deepest loyalty and devotion. The coming together of the Lord's Day and the Nation's Day simply makes visible on the calendar the decision facing us as Christians every day: “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24:15). Now admittedly, most of the time this choice is not put so starkly. Everyone is from somewhere, of course, and part of the pride in being an American is merely the gentle pleasure of being in this place, the joy of being with these people, the reward of being a part of this history, the satisfaction in helping to build this national community. There is something very human and very good about being proud of one's native land, something very natural about putting our hands over our hearts as we sing the national anthem and hanging the red, white, and blue bunting from the balcony. So, most of the time, the choice between the love of God and the love of country is not an either-or decision.

But things are different in a time when we are citizens of the world's only true superpower and when we have so often decided to act like an empire and use that power with a swagger, independent of other nations and according to a self-appointed agenda. Today, American Christians cannot avoid facing the tensions between being a citizen of the reigning power and being a disciple of the Prince of Peace, between our national pride and our commitment to Jesus Christ. Ultimately there are times when we do in fact have to “choose this day whom you will serve.”

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The lectionary is, of course, oblivious to this collision of calendars. As far as the lectionary is concerned this is simply the "14th Sunday in Ordinary Time," just one more Sunday in the church year, one more mile marker in the march of weeks between Pentecost and Advent. But as is so often the case with the lectionary, today we are presented a gospel lesson with an unexpected relevance, a surprising pertinence for Christians struggling with the tension between the Lord's Day and the Nation's Day. If America now sees itself as a nation with a global mission and if the Commander-in-Chief has issued orders accordingly, our reading from the Gospel of Luke reminds us that Jesus, too, has a world-wide mission—quite a different mission—and that the followers of Jesus are also under orders—quite different orders.

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The passage from Luke begins innocently enough. It tells us that Jesus sent out seventy missionaries in pairs. Their job was, like John the Baptist's, to pave the way for Jesus, to go, as Luke says, "to every town and place where he himself intended to go" (10:1). And where is that? Where is it that Jesus intends to go? Everywhere: Jesus intends to go everywhere, to every nation and every tribe. "Repentance and forgiveness," the risen Christ announces at the end of Luke, "is to be proclaimed...to all nations" (24:47).

The fact that there are seventy of these missionaries is no accident. The number almost surely derives from the fact that Genesis 10 lists seventy nations in the earth.¹ In other words, the seventy represent Jesus' intention to be present to all humanity, and these missionaries are to reach out to the full number of nations, to stop at no border, to respect no division of race or clan. Today, Main Street is draped with the stars and stripes, and we celebrate that we are Americans, but more deeply we belong body and soul to Jesus Christ who intends to be Lord of every nation. From the very beginning, the mission of Jesus encompassed all peoples and embraced all races. Jesus' mission has always called us to furl the national flag, to lift the cross, and to head out in Jesus' name into the wide world of peoples and cultures.

In fact, it humbles our nationalistic pride to realize that when Jesus sends out the seventy, we are on the receiving end. They are coming from somewhere else to find *us*. We are the distant people, and these missionaries are fearlessly transgressing boundaries of race and nation to bring the gospel to us. If Jesus had only been a super patriot and if his missionaries had not been sent to all peoples, we would have been left off the list and the gospel would not have reached us at all.

Many years ago, when I was a seminary student I spent a summer in Atlanta as a chaplain intern at what in those days was called Georgia Baptist Hospital. One of the other student chaplains was a seminarian from the Netherlands. One

day, after he had spent a morning visiting the patients on his assigned floor, this student returned to the chaplain's office stomping the floor and muttering angrily under his breath.

"What's the matter with you?" someone asked him. He reported that he had just paid a visit to a new patient, who when she heard his accent, asked him where he was from.

"I'm from Holland," he had told her. "I am studying to be a pastor."

"From Holland!" she had exclaimed. "I had no idea that Southern Baptists had missionaries there."

The young Dutch chaplain said that his blood had boiled and that he had exercised all the willpower he could muster not to snap back, "Look lady, we had Christianity in Europe fifteen hundred years before there was such a thing as a Southern Baptist. You Americans didn't send missionaries to us. We sent them to you." Of course, a similar point could be made of his own homeland. The gospel crossed many borders to get to Europe, too. If the gospel had flown only one flag, it would never have gotten to Europe and it would never have arrived in America, and if Jesus had thought that love of God and love of country were one and the same, he would have ignored those of us outside the borders of Israel.

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We become even more aware of what is at stake in the tensions between Independence Day and the Lord's Day when we hear the contrasting claims of those who would lead us.

Take, for example, our national politicians. John Kerry has said, "the highest responsibility of our government is to provide for the common defense and to keep the American people safe."² Defense and safety. Those are the highest responsibilities. For his part, George W. Bush has said, "Defending our nation against its enemies is the first and fundamental commitment of the federal government."³ Establishing and maintaining the wall between us and the enemy is the first and fundamental commitment.

But Jesus, who also desires to lead us, has another word. Jesus said, "Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves..." (10:3). Jesus also said, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house'" (10:5). In other words, if today we are mainly celebrating the Fourth of July, we are concerned with safety, defense, guarding against our enemies, and homeland security, and our national leaders appropriately speak of these things. If, however, we are observing the Lord's Day, we hear another command. We are called by our Lord to fear nothing and to head right into the midst of those who once we would have thought of as enemies, and to speak a word of peace. Two different days. Two different missions.

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Tim O'Brien has written a short story that draws on his memories from his days as an infantry soldier in Vietnam. The story is titled "The Things They Carried," and it is filled with descriptions of the things the soldiers packed in their gear as they marched and fought. They carried pocketknives, letters from girlfriends, cigarettes, and C-rations. They carried diaries, photographs, binoculars, socks, and Dr. Scholl's foot powder. They carried fatigue jackets, radios, compasses, batteries, maps, and codebooks. They carried weapons – M-60s, M-16s, and M-79s – and they carried plastic explosives, grenades, and Claymore mines. What they carried was partly what they thought they needed to survive, partly a function of rank and duty, and partly an expression of their combat mission. "They carried all they could bear," writes O'Brien, "and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried."⁴

But what about disciples? What are we supposed to carry on our mission? And Jesus said to the seventy, "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals..." (10:4). Carry no fatigue jackets, no M-16s, no codebooks, no Claymore mines. In fact, carry nothing, not even what prudent people would pack for a trip—no money, no extra pairs of shoes—nothing. Disciples are to be utterly dependent upon God and the hospitality of others. Disciples are to carry only the gospel and our trust in God.

In August of 1993, I was visiting and lecturing in South Africa. This was in the dying days of apartheid, the summer before Nelson Mandela was elected president. One Sunday evening I was driving into Pretoria, a powerful and gleaming city of glass and steel skyscrapers built on the profits of gold and diamonds. As I drew close to the city, I saw in one of the grassy expressway cloverleafs an indigenous Christian congregation at worship. They were out there on the mown green circle as traffic swirled around them, dancing and singing praises to God. Every worshiper wore a homemade robe made out of bed sheets and emblazoned with crosses, fish, stars, and suns. As I looked at the skyline of Pretoria and then at these impoverished worshipers caught up in the gospel, I was struck by the contrast. Pretoria had the money and the power. These lowly African Christians had nothing. They had no church building, no status, no hymnals or pipe organs or clergy with pensions. In Jesus' terms, they had "no purse, no bag, no sandals." All they had was God. But looking at proud and confident Pretoria and then looking at them dancing in the power of the Spirit, one just knew that the future belonged to them.

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For most of us, I imagine, we can have it both ways today. We can sing "Have Thine Own Way, Lord" and still proudly watch the bands march down the street in the Independence Day parade. We can pray "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" and, as Merle Haggard sang, "still wave old Glory down at the courthouse." But in ways sometimes large and sometimes small, in

ways dramatic and in ways almost unnoticed, there come occasions for all of us when we have to decide which passport we carry, which loyalty finally claims us, which commander-in-chief gives the orders we obey.

The prize-winning movie *The Pianist* is based on the true story of the World War II experiences of Polish concert pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman. In September of 1939, Szpilman played Chopin's "Nocturne in C-sharp Minor" live over Radio Warsaw as shells from a German army bombardment exploded outside the studio. It was the last broadcast from Radio Warsaw, as the German army occupied the city that day. In a matter of days, Szpilman, a Jew, was in hiding and the rest of his family had been deported to the death camps. Szpilman spent the war as a fugitive, in constant danger of being discovered by the Nazi occupiers and sent, like so many others, to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Near the end of the war, Szpilman, still in hiding and secreted away in the attic of an abandoned Warsaw house, was discovered by a German officer. Normally this would have meant sure death, but astonishingly, the officer befriended Szpilman, secretly, and at great risk to himself, provided Szpilman food, warm clothing, and protection.

Though the movie version of the story omits the officer's identity, he was, in fact, Captain Wilm Hosenfeld, a Christian. After the war it was revealed that Hosenfeld had saved the life of many Jews, defying orders and risking being executed as a traitor for doing so. Once, when riding a bicycle near the Polish town of Pabianice, Hosenfeld had encountered a young Jewish woman running desperately down the road. When he asked her where she was going, she was so frightened she stammered out the truth and told Hosenfeld that she was pregnant and that her husband was a prisoner in the concentration camp. She was going to the camp to beg for his release. Hosenfeld wrote down the husband's name and said to the frightened wife, "Your husband will be home again in three days time." And, indeed he was.

On another occasion, Hosenfeld had learned that the Gestapo had rounded up a number of men, including the brother-in-law of a priest who had labored sacrificially in the underground. They were being taken by truck to a work camp, and the brother-in-law was to be executed. Hosenfeld spotted the truck moving through town, waved it down, and told the S.S. commander, "I need a man" for a labor detail. He picked out the priest's brother-in-law, as if by random selection, and the man's life was saved.

As the German war effort collapsed, Hosenfeld was captured and died forgotten and alone in a Russian prisoner of war camp. Just before he died, he wrote in his diary, "Why did this war have to happen at all? ...We will not listen to the divine commandment, 'Love one another.'" ⁵ Today, Hosenfeld is remembered as a saint and a hero, and there is a tree planted in his memory in Israel on the Avenue of the Righteous, beside the River Jordan.

“See,” said Jesus, “I am sending you like lambs into the midst of wolves. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’”

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James Billington, the Librarian of Congress and a student of Russian history, happened to be in Moscow in August of 1991, the tumultuous time when the old Soviet regime was giving way to a new social order. These were tense and dangerous days, and power was balanced on a razor’s edge. Boris Yeltzin and a small group of defenders occupied the Russian White House and successfully managed to face off an enormous number of tanks and troops poised to attack, to put down the rebellion, and to restore the old guard in the Soviet Union.

Surprisingly, a key role in this successful resistance was played, said Billington, by the *babushkas*, the “old women in the church” and their courageous public Christian witness. These bandana wearing old women, who had kept the Orthodox Christian church alive for years during the Soviet period, were the butt of many jokes over the years by both Russians and Westerners alike. Nothing could have seemed more pathetic or irrelevant than they, and they were widely regarded as evidence of the eventual death of religion in the Soviet Union.

And yet on the critical night of August 20, 1991, when martial law was proclaimed, and people were told to go to their homes, many of these women disobeyed and went immediately to the place of confrontation. Some of them fed the resisters in a public display of support. Others staffed medical stations, others prayed for a miracle, while still others, astoundingly, climbed up onto the tanks, peered through the slits at the crew-cut men inside and told them there were new orders, these from God: Thou shalt not kill. The young men stopped the tanks. “The attack,” said Billington, “never came, and by dawn of the third day we realized that the tide had turned.”⁶

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When the seventy missionaries came back from their journeys to report to Jesus what had happened, they returned with surprising joy, bringing with them astounding tales of healing, peace, and victory. “Yes,” replied Jesus, “while you were doing the work of the gospel, I saw Satan fall like lightning” (10:18). In other words, the disciples thought they were out doing small deeds of ministry, unnoticed acts of compassion. They were simply obeying the commands of Jesus, traveling to forgotten places, touching neglected lives, working in obscure corners of the world and speaking peace and proclaiming the kingdom. But Jesus told them their deeds of mercy and grace were bringing evil to its knees. “The world saw a ragtag army of workers for peace,” said Jesus, “but

what I saw was Satan plummeting from his throne.”

So if you are interested in a midsummer’s break, a relaxing day spent waving the flag, grilling steaks, and catching a few rays as you tune in the last innings of the ball game, then today is July the Fourth. Enjoy.

But if you want your life to count, really count, then know that you are baptized and you have orders from another commander. Somewhere along the way, you will be called to leave your wallet, your luggage, and your spare wardrobe in the closet; you will be called to take a deep breath and to head out into places you never imagined you’d go in the name of Christ. Maybe you will be sent to comfort a friend in the hospital, maybe to speak a word of reconciliation in a neighbor’s living room, maybe to be a healer in a distant land, maybe to take a courageous stand in the public square. You will carry with you only one thing, Jesus’ gospel of peace. The way will be hard and the path uncertain, but by the grace of God your work will become a part of God’s work and will help to knock the powers of evil off the throne. Satan will fall from the sky like a flash of lightning, and your name will be written in heaven.

It all depends on what day you think this is.

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Notes

1. R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol.9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 219. The manuscripts of Luke are almost evenly divided on the number of those Jesus sent out, some saying seventy were appointed and others saying seventy-two. Likewise the evidence for the numbers of nations in Genesis 10 is divided. The Hebrew text lists seventy, while the Septuagint lists seventy-two.

2. www.johnkerry.com.

3. www.georgewebush.com.

4. Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Broadway Books, 1990), 7. Thanks to Patrick Willson and Michael Lindvall for pointing me to this story and for making the connection to this text.

5. Hosenfeld’s story and portions of his diary can be found in Wladyslaw Szpilman, *The Pianist* (New York: Picador, 1999).

6. James H. Billington, “The Religious Dimensions of Post-Modern Change,” American Theological Library Association, Summary of Proceedings, 52/1998, 154-155. The account of the *babushkas* is taken from this essay and from comments made in various addresses by Billington. Additional details of this story can be found in Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, forthcoming).