

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Burt L. Burleson

“Bearing Witness to Wolves”

Luke 10: 1-11

July 8, 2007

Among the ancients there is this story told.

“**What action shall I perform today?**” the disciple asked the elder.

“**If you wish to attain God,**” the elder said, “**There are two things you must know. The first is that all efforts to obtain God are of no avail.**

“**And the second?**” the disciple insisted.

“**The second is that you must act as if you did not know the first.**” (Chittister, Insights for the Ages 30)

There is nothing to do... there is everything to do. God reveals... we have to learn to see. God comes to us... we must be on the path to God.

In the spiritual tradition, it's called The Way, that's the term they used to describe the spiritual journey. Someone who was trying to know God was on The Way and in the earliest days of the Church, Christians weren't called Christians, they were called People of the Way. They walked a certain path. It implies movement...going from here to there. Leaving one place for another.

That's what the gospel story invites us into or onto. When we read the gospels we don't so much find there a system of doctrine or set of rules, as we do a way of walking.

So, we read a text like this one today... not only seeing what Jesus is literally setting up... (this kind of missionary expansion of his ministry...) But we see him again inviting us into a certain way of being...onto a path.

“**I'm sending you...** is what he says. So, it's clear that what he's doing in this little tiny corner of the world isn't going to stay there. It's going global.

Jesus has 70 (or 72 folks depending on the manuscript) disciples gathered around. A number that would make the reader think of the number of nations thought to exist in the world. So Luke, in his typical form, is making this gospel universal.

“**It's not just for us kosher chickens... this is about the whole world.**”

But even as you read that, you also read between the lines... **the ones on the path are the ones being sent.** It's our MO. People of the way are always on the move. Of course we are. It's our MO. And it's our MO because it's God's MO. There is this movement within God... That's really what the Trinity takes us to...

God's being is not self-contained... Perfection is always flowing, it's going forth. Father into Son and Son into Spirit and Spirit back into Father... It's never static but always expansive... always outgoing...

Into creation...time and space and history.

Into The Incarnation...

Into the Church.

And what we always need to affirm is that God's nature is our true nature. So... how could we not be the ones who are sent. “**Even as God sent me... so send I you.**” It's our true nature...on our way.

Not static and set...

Not settled but unsettled.

Not staying put but going forth.

In other words, for people on the path there's no staying put. There's no “same ol' same ol'.” We think differently about the privilege of living in the time we have here on earth. We're on a path.

It's our life. To live in God is to move... We're sent, but that's not all, is it. **"I'm sending you out,"** Jesus says, **"as lambs among wolves."** The text isn't just claiming that we go, but it's naming how we go... Like lambs out among the wolves... Yep.

Who huffs and puffs and blows houses down?

Who has big teeth, the better to eat you with?

Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?

We are, that's who? Don't give me any of this "tra-la-la-la" business. Wolves are scary and ravenous... They have bottomless-pit appetites... They're eating machines (to quote "Jaws"). They travel in packs and descend on the helpless... especially little lambs.

Jesus conjures up the perfect picture of vulnerability... a lamb among wolves. When a lamb sees a wolf he just hands him the knife and fork and rolls over. (A line from Alan Walworth) Complete helplessness. There's no defense... none. Only lamb chops.

Remember the biblical image of the eschatological age to come... when everything was finally made right... It was when the lamb would lie down with the wolf. See, we'll know everything has changed when that has happened. When the wolf isn't salivating as he lies next to the lamb and the lamb isn't shivering in fear.

Just imagine this sending moment for a minute. Jesus has them gathered around for some instructions. **"There's a big, beautiful field out there ready to harvest. ... Not a lot of workers. You're all we've got but I'm sending you out anyway."**

They're all standing there... there's an excitement in the air. It's finally about to happen. Everyone's pumped.

Lot's of high-fiving...

Chest bumping...

"You-go-girl', you da man..." all that.

Then Jesus starts his speech.

"Okay folks... here's the strategy... Lambs among wolves."

And the whole room gulps.

"Travel light... Don't pack anything... not even an extra pair of sandals."

Well, they had all jam-packed several suitcases the night before.

"Don't take a purse."

Everyone already had a load of traveler's checks.

"You're going to be staying in homes.... We don't know where for sure... just ask around when you get there and see who's willing to take you in."

So much for the hotel reservations.

"And once you get there... don't be hopping and shopping around looking for a better place to stay... just stay put and deal with things there. And... eat whatever is put in front of you."

"O my gosh... what kind of unkosher assignment is this?" They all had little traveling coolers ready to go with plenty of righteous, pork-free, snacks.

You can just feel the stomach acid doing its thing around the circle of 70.

The muscles are tightening...

Heart rates going.

And I wonder if some of the 70 aren't thinking...

"Oh Jesus, do we have to ask for food and lodging... that's always so awkward. How about the Ramada? Or at least the RV?"

"I'd really like to take my new Armani power tunic and my Gucci purse and my Air Jordanian sandals... I'd hate to look poor and not make a good first impression."

"Lambs among wolves, huh... Well, don't send us out two by two... at least let us bunch up in a herd or something... and maybe we'd be more effective if we disguised ourselves as wolves. How about sending us out as 'lambs in wolves clothing.' We better fight fire with fire and fang with fang, Jesus, or we don't stand a chance."

I think those are the kinds of internal protest that are going on. In fact... I know they are. Who wants to walk that way.

Who wants to be that vulnerable... to be in a place that is foreign, where you aren't in control and you have to be dependent? Who wants to be in the place where you don't have the upper hand?

Who wants to be out there like that where great failure is an option?

Who would allow their weaknesses to be exposed that way?

Why would anyone do that?

We would only do it if walking a certain path were something we were committed to. We'd do it because this is the way we were told to walk...as lambs among wolves. We'd only do it because we're people of the way and it's a vulnerable way.

Have you ever considered just how vulnerable God is? Again, the Trinity is a place of great vulnerability, right...each Person so connected to the Other, exposed to the Other...so that vulnerable reality gets expressed.

God the Father, creating this beautiful world for us to cherish... or not.

And sets up a garden where we can obey... or not...

And sends a son we can follow or not...

And sets up a Church to be faithful... or not.

How else could the sent ones be sent but vulnerable as he is.

Richard Rohr says that the cross is, "**The vulnerable name for God.**" Other theologians have talked about our being saved by God's weakness on the cross. It is a lamb that saves us.

And it's lambs we're called to be over the protest of most every fiber of our being. You know what I mean, right? The temptation to become wolves as we go is so profound. ... to seek the power of what is out there and claim it for what's in here.

It happens all the time.

Any of you ever find yourself getting your ducks in a row so you can "not be" so vulnerable? Get your words ready? Your talking pants. Your debating ducks in a row? Ever practice your snarling?

We who are sent into that wolfy-world out there are guilty of this all the time. We envy the wolf pack's power so we network and we ally. We envy their capacity for intimidation, so we get tougher and snarl louder at our opposition.

We're afraid of being hurt so we find places to hide, places of protection. We join the most powerful group. Join a chat room where we can complain about whatever is against us... and it feels so much better... licking our chops together. Gossip and piling on and showing off with our thinking, putting folks in their place... that's some impressive snarling huh? What's all our acquisition about? Is it to hide our basic simple dependency on God?

No one really wants to be sent out like a lamb. The Church has never really liked it either.

Historically, the Church is driven more by its need for success and survival than by its call to be faithful to our founder. We were very impressed with Rome and it's power and decided to that on for size and it seemed to fit pretty well, so we got all dressed up like that wolf.

We tend to adopt the ways of the wolf because they just work better. They do! At least by all first appearances. It pays to be the wolf. It's such an odd thing, a sad thing, but we do it over and over. And we start thinking that the Church of Jesus Christ is dependant upon that.

Let me just say a few things here to get your attention... and just see if I can't offend everyone in the room.

The Church of Jesus Christ isn't dependant on the United States of America... or on the power of a moral majority or an activist minority. The Church isn't dependant on any form of government... including democracy... and not even on great principles like religious liberty. Offended yet?

We don't need the culture... The Church isn't dependent on The Wonder Years... or the Good Ol' Days ... or the Framer's Intent... or Prayer at high school Football Games. Offended? The church bears witness by being lambs, not foxes.

The Church doesn't need the right structure and organization in order to insure its success. The Church isn't in the insurance business. We're people on a path. We don't need coerced uniformity in order to make sure we don't head down the wrong road. "**If we don't protect orthodoxy, the kingdom will be lost.**" Offended yet? Better act like wolves or we'll lose the farm.

God's work in the world is never dependant on the world's power? Lot's of us here are into all sorts of things out there. Good causes, agencies, institutions... and it's great that we give ourselves to all of that but don't

ever think that the kingdom is hanging in the balance. God's redemptive purposes are not dependant upon our saving or protecting or reclaiming or fixing those things. Offended? There's never a cause large enough for lambs to snarl...especially not at one another. But we do...go to a CBF meeting with me someday. We moderates thrive on snarling at fundamentalists.

The Church is eternal...there's no need for anxiety or defensiveness.

It does not have to become culturally relevant?

It does not need to be entertaining? That's a wolf instinct.

It doesn't need the world's yardsticks... how many? How big? How influential? How powerful?

If I haven't offended you yet, it's because I hate being a vulnerable lamb... and I'm busy being cute and subtly persuasive so you'll agree with me. I'm a passive-aggressive wolf.

I hate snarling... I get too anxious and can't think, and you wouldn't be impressed, and I so need you to be impressed. ...Wouldn't want you to think I was stupid... like a sheep... like a lamb. I hate being a lamb. No one wants to be a lamb.

Exposed...

Soft...

Dismissed...

So easily scattered.

Here's the thing, though. The minute we stop being lambs we forsake who we really are and whose we are. We cut off the connection to our real protection. Whatever a lamb has in the way of protection and power and sustenance and life comes from the Good Shepherd. (A.W.)

... Who, I know, doesn't look all that powerful...slain as he is...does he? And lots of his lambs get hurt just like he does, don't they?

... But... I don't know... his love is so profound... maybe there is power in that we're underestimating... great death-defeating power in death.

Maybe there is relevance "buried there" we can't see... something so real and beyond what we think is real. Maybe in that Loving Vulnerable Shepherd there is...some mysterious, upside-down, deep magic that we can't measure with a wolf stick. That's what we're counting on as we walk this way.

It is our story, remember... You have read the way it ends, haven't you?

In the end, it's the lamb that is left standing. Remember in Revelation? It's the lamb standing, and listen to the language, "**looking as if it had been slain.**" Wolf marks all over this Lamb. (An image from Alan Walworth)

But the wolves that seemed so significant have scattered and it's the lamb left standing and to whom all creation is singing.

Worthy is the lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! Every creature in heaven and on earth... from the ants to the angels... they're all singing and we're singing... To him be praise and honor forever and ever forever and ever. Amen? Amen!

Burt L. Burlison, Copyright 2007

(In February of 1996, I heard Alan Walworth preach one of the best sermons I've ever heard. It was so good and memorable that it's influence on my own preaching on this text will be ongoing and significant. His ideas and images are all over my sermon.)