

PUTTING FAITH INTO ACTION: Jesus' Strategic Plan for Mission

A Reflection on Congregation, Faith-Based Community Organizing

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Luke 10: 1-11, 17-20 (NRSV)

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.'"

(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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This story of the commissioning of the seventy is one of three texts identified by many Jesus scholars as the single most authentic source for presenting a picture of the historical Jesus. Although every verse in the New Testament is subjectively filtered through the eyes of resurrection faith, confessing Jesus as the Christ, there are occasional snapshots offered that reveal an objective picture of what actually must have taken place. This story is one such literary photo.

The three texts, each telling the story of Jesus sending a group of disciples to go ahead of him, are:

- ◆ The original story which inspires the others is found in Mark 6:6b-13. *Then Jesus went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*
- ◆ Obviously influenced by Mark’s telling, although varying slightly in some of the details, the story appears again in Luke 9:1-6. *Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He said to them, “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.*
- ◆ Finally, in the text under consideration in this reflection, Luke 10:1ff, found only in this gospel and closely paralleling the above two accounts, the story is expanded from twelve who are sent out to seventy (or seventy-two—the manuscript evidence is evenly balanced between these two numbers).

John Dominic Crossan argues that these texts present us with a unique picture of the historical Jesus and his strategy for engaging in mission. It takes both an ideal, creative vision and a practical, social program to constitute a mission. In this story of the commissioning of the seventy, Jesus combines the two. [The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant, p. 349]

Vision without a specific program is utopian in nature—idealism disconnected from the practical realities of bringing about change. On the other hand, while program without vision might be successful in showing short-term results, such a one-sided activist emphasis, cut adrift from values that are grounded in the needs and hopes of humans, is vulnerable to every political agenda that comes along.

For Jesus, the strategy comes down to a simple equation:

Mission = Creative Vision + Social Program.

A verse-by-verse reading of this text reveals Jesus’ strategic plan for mission:

- v. 1. *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.*

Whether we go with the number seventy or seventy-two, the point Luke is making is that this mission is growing in influence. What started with one person, Jesus, expands at first to twelve in the calling of the disciples. In this story of the commissioning of the seventy the number of persons engaged in the very same mission as Jesus and the twelve increases six-fold. By the time we come to Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, there are three thousand persons added to the ranks on the Day of Pentecost. (Acts 2:41) Only two chapters later, in response to the preaching of Peter and John, the believers numbered about five thousand. (4:4) And so on as Paul carried the mission beyond Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth as it was known in the far-reaching Roman Empire. One, 12, 70, 3000, 5000... Luke counts like a community organizer!

At the heart of mission is not merely addressing issues, but building an organization. That is what Luke is describing. This is an organization that is being built with a broad base of leaders, not a movement confined to a solitary charismatic leader. Jesus does not hang on to this mission as if he is the only person who can carry it out. That would have limited the impact of his influence, confining results to himself alone and to the relatively few places where he was able to go. What Jesus does, however, is to release the mission to others as he sends them on ahead to places where he himself intended to go, but presumably couldn't. And in sending persons out in pairs, two-by-two, this mission builds into it accountability. Isolated, solitary individuals bent on doing their own thing need not apply; this mission carried out in partnership is about building community.

v. 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."*

The need addressed by this mission is overwhelming. The "harvest" of human hurt is plentiful indeed. Even when one focuses close to home—thinking globally, acting locally—the problems faced by families in our cities are massive. Who does not feel small and insignificant when faced with this seemingly insurmountable challenge?

But the same metaphor also expresses a sense of urgency about this mission. When the crops are ripe, they must be reaped. Harvest season is always a time of great urgency. We do not have the luxury of waiting until tomorrow to begin to organize.

v. 3. *"Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves."*

This plentiful harvest of human need is not so much a problem as it is an opportunity. As long as the challenge remains a problem, it is elusive—too complex and bewildering to address. Once a problem is turned into an issue, however, it becomes manageable and achievable. To think in terms of issues rather than problems is to be on our way already.

This mission is not for the faint-hearted. There will be considerable resistance to overcome. The families of our communities are like innocents when pitted against well-organized, moneyed, special interest groups who have so much power. Power means simply the ability to act. But there is more than one kind of power—more than one way

effectively to act, to bring about change. In addition to the power of money there is the power of relationship. Those whom Jesus sends out on this mission are like lambs, armed with the power of relationship, confronting those who are like wolves, armed with the power of money. It is not without risk to be a lamb in the midst of wolves. Which is why it is essential that the lambs be well organized.

v. 4. *“Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.”*

There is a tendency to think that the more armor one carries into battle, the safer one is. And the more paraphernalia brought along on a vacation, the more enjoyable the trip will be. But Jesus counsels those embarking upon his mission to travel lightly, discovering their strength to lie in their vulnerability. This mission will be accomplished not by glossy brochures and high-tech presentations, but by unadorned personal stories told with conviction and passion.

Once on the way, it is important to stay focused upon the task at hand. There will be many temptations to be diverted from the mission. Singleness of purpose on the journey is essential for assuring safe arrival at the desired destination.

vs.5-6 *“Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.”*

This mission is profoundly personal. The pronouncement of peace in the first century was a common greeting used by persons meeting persons. The foundation stone upon which all community organizing is built is the one-to-one. These are invitational in nature, not coercive. They are based upon listening to the concerns of others and are not driven by an agenda. In wishing peace to a house and all who dwell within it is to value that particular family, respecting and honoring what they express to be in their interests.

There is no guarantee that those who open the door of their home will respond positively to our well-intentioned greetings. Indeed, they might not even come to the door! Our witness to peace—to shalom, to the wholeness of justice-love—in our broken, sin-sick world will not and need not receive a 100% response. There is no minimum level of response that is either expected or required to validate this mission. In fact, Luke gives us no clue about the size of response that the seventy received. Only that they returned with joy.

v. 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.”*

This mission is not about providing charity. Rather, it is about empowerment. This mission is not about brokering power, rendering others indebted to us. Rather, it is about the power of servanthood that liberates. This mission is not top down, in which persons of superior strength and insight make others to become dependent upon them in the name of providing assistance.

No, this mission is based upon hospitality. It is not an occasional excursion to the other side of the tracks to help those considered by us to be less fortunate, quickly retreating to the safety of our privileged enclave. But it is one that requires of us that we remain in the same place to share life together—in a spirit of mutuality and partnership and collaboration.

vs.8-9. *“Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”*

This mission is focused upon specific, tangible, measurable goals—such as eating with our neighbors and curing the sick who are in front of us and speaking words of hope. There is no place here for utopian generalizations, like “God’s in his heaven—All’s right with the world.” Or religious cliches that promise salvation for the soul while ignoring injuries to the body.

This mission is not one more of those endless discussions in which do-gooders moan and groan, grumble and complain, parade and posture. Rather, there is something tangible to show for our efforts. There are concrete results. This is about taking action.

vs.10-11. *“But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘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.’”*

This mission is pragmatic, with eyes always focussed upon the desired objective. No time is wasted where response is not forthcoming. This mission does not allow itself to become dragged down by the persons who don’t respond and who don’t take responsibility. Rather, this mission builds upon strength, not allowing its energies to be sucked up by weakness. Precious, limited resources are invested where there is positive response.

Those persons who do not respond cannot invalidate the mission. Something bigger is going on here than our own social and political concerns. The fact of the matter is that the kingdom of God has come near. It is at hand, within reach, something we can taste and touch in the present moment, however fragmentary it might be. God’s reign of justice-love is being manifested in the here and now as we engage in this mission.

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To return to the basic equation of Jesus’ strategic plan for mission:

MISSION = CREATIVE VISION + SOCIAL PROGRAM.

What is the Vision and where did it come from?

God’s kingdom/reign is near/at hand/within reach. This claim of Jesus stands in stark contrast with the obvious social reality of the first century, Greco-Roman world. It would

have been obvious to anyone that Caesar's rule, not God's, was prevalent. The rule of Caesar was marked by control and domination. God's rule, on the other hand, is marked by freedom and responsibility, justice and love.

To speak of vision is to describe a future reality. It is to see ahead, to imagine what tomorrow could be like. Jesus' vision is of the reign of God. To speak of this reign being near, being at hand, is to affirm that the future is breaking into the present moment. In the midst of Caesar's rule of control and domination, God's rule of justice-love is already being experienced as we engage in this mission.

This vision of the kingdom of God is not entirely unique to Jesus. He received it from those witnesses too many to count, ancestors in faith, the prophets of old. The vision of God's reign comes not through isolated religious experience, but through the people of God, the community of faith.

In Jesus' inaugural sermon as reported by Luke (4:16-20), he stood up to read in the synagogue where he had been brought up. Unrolling the scroll of the prophet Isaiah that had been given to him, he read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

To be sure, these verses from Isaiah [61:1-2 and 56:6] are interpreted by Jesus in his subsequent ministry which unfolds. He shapes these words from the faith-tradition for his own context, strategically applying them in imaginative and creative ways. But he does not make them up out of whole cloth like some guru claiming a private spiritual revelation. The vision of the kingdom of God—including Jesus' own unique articulation of that vision—arises from community, from the people of God.

Luke portrays Jesus as standing in the prophetic tradition of Elijah and Elisha upon whom the Spirit of the Lord had also come. More than any other gospel, Luke is concerned with Jesus' attitude toward the economically and socially poor, as is expressed in the prophetic words of bringing "glad tidings to the poor." In proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor—namely, the jubilee, the time when debts would be forgiven—Jesus is opposing the punitive justice of Caesar's present reign with an announcement that God's future reign of distributive justice was already breaking into history.

What is Jesus' Program?

In what is unique with Jesus, he offers a three part social program:

- ◆ Table fellowship: The most intimate of social relationships possible is eating together. Relationship is the first part of Jesus' social program.
- ◆ Curing the sick: In this sinsick, broken world in which everyone embodies that brokenness—not only the obviously sick and disabled and possessed and

those ground down by crushing poverty, but healers who are wounded as well—curing the sick is a radical statement of the central importance of self-interest. The second part of Jesus’ social program is addressing self-interest.

- ◆ And announcing, ‘The kingdom of God has come near’: At the heart of vision is defining a new reality. Through the power of words, a world is created. As God created the universe through a spoken word, so also Jesus created a new social reality in announcing the immanent presence of the kingdom of God. In saying that this reign of God is near, at hand, what is made accessible in the here and now is the embodiment of hope, the institutionalizing of trust, the incarnational enfleshment of the future. The third part of Jesus’ social program is making hope real.

What is central to this particular mission as Luke describes it throughout his gospel is the God of Jesus. The purpose of this mission that Jesus sends the seventy out upon is not to make each of his followers into a little Jesus. Rather, his disciples are commissioned to the very same ministry that Jesus himself was engaged in: eating with sinners and outcasts, curing the sick and broken-hearted, and making hope real by proclaiming the reachable reign of the God of Jesus. As Jesus is a leader, those who follow him become leaders as well.

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How did the seventy feel when they returned home from their missionary journey? What did they report back when they met with Jesus and with one another?

Vs.17-20 The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” He said to them, “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. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

They returned with joy! This mission is rewarding, not depleting. There is no burn-out here, no wells drying up, but fathomless reservoirs of hope and strength and energy. In this mission there is something larger and more profound going on than in the most noble of human pursuits.

This mythological talk of Satan falling from heaven, and of treading upon snakes and scorpions, is a reminder that this mission is no mere activist agenda for an improved world, but an action of cosmic scale. Where real authority is discovered, and true power is exercised, we need not fear the outcome of these endeavors. For a life invested in this mission of Jesus is given to nothing other than the work of God.

And that is indeed reason to rejoice!