

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

July 3, 2022

Rejoice at what?

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Did you catch how Jesus corrected the returning seventy at the end of our reading today? They come back rejoicing, but they are apparently rejoicing at the wrong thing. They are excited that even the demons submit to them in the name of Christ. And who wouldn't be? That sounds pretty awesome! Kicking demons out of the possessed? Imagine the crowds you could impress with that sort of power! But Jesus redirects their joy: "Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."¹

The seventy come back acting much the way I suspect most of us would act too. I can just picture them all crowded around Jesus, talking over one another in order to report all that they had seen and done. The excitement in the air must have been palpable! I almost wonder if there was any one upmanship going on. "How many people did you heal? I healed a dozen!" "Oh yeah? Well, I exorcised 6 demons all by myself, so there!" Doesn't that sound pretty typically human?

Jesus doesn't seem all that interested in the accomplishments of the seventy while on their journeys. After all, none of his instructions at the start of our reading have any sort of goals attached to them. As a matter of fact, his instructions convey a sense of urgency that almost disregards measurables. Jesus doesn't tell them to keep haranguing people who are not interested. Contrary to what the fire and brimstone preachers I see occasionally down at CW seem to think, the seventy are not told to keep preaching in the face of disinterest or rejection. Rather, Jesus tells them to move on. Find the next village and share the Gospel there. It's not about keeping track of souls saved or deeds of power done. Instead it's about getting the message out, urgently.

¹ Luke 10:20 (NRSV)

So Jesus corrects them when they return, he redirects them to what ought to be their true source of joy. Rather than rejoicing at what they've accomplished he wants them to rejoice at who they are, at whose they are. Do not rejoice in the power at work in and through you, he says; which makes a great deal of sense since the power doesn't come from them anyway, it comes from God. Rather rejoice at the reality of your new identity and the opportunity you have had to share the good news of who you now belong to.

In this moment in time, with all that's going on in the world around us, this message is vitally important. There are so many forces in the world today seeking to distract us from the true source of joy. So many forces that seek to divide and conquer us. Trying to get us to look for joy in the silliest of things, suggesting the basest and most human of reasons to rejoice. We are told to take joy in our ideologies, in our accomplishments, in our politics, in our guns, in our race, in our sexuality, in our wealth, in our possessions, in our networks, in our power. We are told that these are the things we are to use to define who we are. These are the things that we should look to as sources of joy.

But none of these things lead to true joy, do they? At best they lead to a temporary sort-of satiation. A brief, passing moment wherein we feel slightly less empty than we did before. There's nothing lasting about this "joy," nothing that fulfills or makes us whole. On the contrary, joy based on such base and human things often just leads us to envy, hatred, or burn out.

True joy though, that comes from knowing that we are claimed and loved by God. True joy can be found in loving and accepting relationships, grounded in shared identity as children of God. True joy can be found in a family gathered around the font, knowing that their loved one now shares in a powerful new reality, a new way of being in the world. True joy means knowing who we are and what that means for our relationship with God, neighbor, and creation.

Jesus sends the seventy out with the Gospel good news of a new Way of living and being. A Way that is "good news to the poor," "release to the captives," "sight to the blind," and freedom to the "oppressed."² A Way that recognizes God as the source of all that we need. A Way that is grounded on peace, and not just any peace, but *shalom*. The sort of peace that comes from being whole. The sort of peace that comes from knowing who you are and knowing who you are in relation to God, neighbor, and creation.

² Luke 4:18 (NRSV)

This is not a way that we can force people on, that would be antithetical to the Way itself. It is a way that we can only invite people to journey with us on. It is a Way that requires subjugating our wills, our egos, to the will of God. God's will which is concerned with love and grace, inclusion and community. God's will which is focused on justice, peace, and compassion. A will drastically different than our own.

Perhaps that's why Jesus corrects the seventy more than anything else. Rejoicing in the power of God at work in and through us too easily leads to thinking that the power is our own. It would be too tempting for us to think that our wills are involved in God's work. Luther reminds us that this way of thinking always leads to sin. Thesis 14 of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation should ring in our ears whenever we think about sharing the Gospel and inviting others to join us on the Way: "Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity."³

Jesus corrects the seventy, teaching them to rejoice in what God has accomplished through them because of who they are and who God is. Not because of any effort of will, word, or action on their part. We rejoice at how God uses us to do kingdom-work, not at our meager efforts! And how freeing this thought is! We walk the Way best when we are passive to God's will. In the end all we are called to do, is nothing! Rather we are called to **be**. Be who God made us to be. The best task we can pursue is getting out of the Spirit's way and trusting that as we walk the Way of Christ God will use us to invite others on to it too.

We have been freed to go out into the world, trusting in God's providence, relying on community, focusing on *shalom* peace, all in order to share what God has already done for us. We are free to give good news to the poor (which also means helping them and questioning the systems that keep them poor). We are free to trust that God will provide (keeping us from slavery to wealth and possessions). And we are free to rest in and share *shalom* peace with the world (peace that is the presence of true justice as MLK taught⁴). All because, as Luther teaches again in his Heidelberg Disputation, "The law says, **do this**, and it is never done. Grace says, **believe in this**, and

³ Luther, M., & Tappert, T. G. (2007). *Selected writings of Martin Luther*. Fortress Press.

⁴ "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." – Stride Toward Freedom (1958)

everything is already done.”⁵ So go and share what has already been done for you! Then rejoice at whose you are and what God has done through you.

Amen.

⁵ Luther, M., & Tappert, T. G. (2007). *Selected writings of Martin Luther*. Fortress Press.