

Sticking Your Neck Out
Luke 10:1-11; 17-20
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Since this is Independence Day, maybe we should begin considering this: isn't it amazing that in the same generation and in one room there was gathered together an eclectic group of visionaries who changed the course of history? Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Witherspoon, Sam Adams, John Hancock and fifty other brave souls staked their lives and fortunes on the revolutionary idea that all men are created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights, namely life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

A rationalist would argue it was a happy coincidence, but I don't believe in coincidence. Somehow God is always in the mix, sometimes hidden, other times obvious, but always present to work out his purposes.

At the same time, remember that God gave us the gift of free will. You can chose to cooperate or not with God, which in turn has both intended and unintended consequences impacting not only you, but others as well. So, we're not just helpless pawns whose every move is already predetermined, we have the freedom to decide whether or not we want to cooperate with the flow of salvation history. Maybe God set up the pieces on the chess board, but we're free to make our own moves.

A comparison can be made between the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence and the Seventy Jesus sent out ahead of him, if only because both the Founders and the Seventy made the free will decision to stick their necks out. Both treaded uncharted ground knowing their efforts would probably be rejected by their neighbors. Nevertheless they answered the call to be and do their best for a cause greater than themselves. That takes faith, vision, courage and commitment, especially when you chose to go ahead of the crowd with no guarantee anyone will follow.

Experience shows when it comes time for change, especially revolutionary change, there are always three distinct groups that emerge in any given situation. First there are those who see change as inevitable and good if the status quo has run its course and outlived its usefulness. Then there are those who oppose any change because they like things just the way they are. The third group comes from Missouri and has that "show me" attitude, but when change finally comes they usually get on board.

The Founding Fathers and the Seventy were agents of change. The Tories and the Pharisees fought to keep the status quo. And in the middle were those waiting to be convinced one way or the other. These were the ones Jesus

referred to as “the harvest,” the ones ripe for the gospel, if only someone with faith, courage, vision and commitment would stick their necks out.

That’s why besides saying “the harvest is plentiful” Jesus added, “but the laborers are few.” It’s true of any organization, isn’t it? They say 20% of any volunteer organization does 80% of the work and paid consultants make good money helping businesses and nonprofits try to turn those numbers around. But especially in the Church, when push comes to shove, the most effective method to raise up more laborers is through prayer. Jesus also said, “...therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.”

Obviously, Jesus prayed hard for those seventy new recruits, raised up to broaden the base of his missionary team. And these new men knew exactly what they were getting into because Jesus warned them, “See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.” They knew they were sticking their necks out.

They must have done a good job of it, because two thousand years later there are approximately one billion Christians currently living on the planet which, when you think about it, is quite an accomplishment, until you realize it was inevitable because, after all, it was God’s will. Even so, there had to be enough laborers to make it happen, men and women who chose to stick their necks out and make the necessary sacrifices to bring Christ and his Kingdom to a godless world.

I hope by now you’re wondering, “Am I sticking my neck out for Christ and his Kingdom, giving my time, gifts and talents to express God’s love by being an intentional Christ-like presence wherever I am?”

Before I go any further, I have to warn you this is another stewardship sermon. It’s not about fund raising, so you can hold on to your wallets, but it is about raising up laborers who choose to be faithful stewards of their time, energy and talents for the Kingdom of God. Notice I didn’t say for Babcock Presbyterian Church, because our congregation isn’t an end in itself, but the means God has given us to bring Christ’s love to our neighborhood.

You may remember me saying in past sermons the world culture is changing, so the Church must change as well, not the content of Christ’s Gospel, but the way we serve together in Christ’s name.

You’ve also heard me speak of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and martyr who struggled to keep Christianity alive during the Nazi era. In the movie “Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace” we find Bonhoeffer and a few of his fellow prisoners, some of whom were agnostic, being transported by the Gestapo to their next destination. They stopped at an abandoned church where Bonhoeffer gave an impromptu sermon.

He said, "I've been thinking about what Christ will mean in the future. We'll need a new form of Christianity in the time when the world has come of age. I think there's only one purpose for religion in the modern world, where people must come and share each other's suffering and share in the suffering of God in a godless world. We'll need more than just religion in the former sense, we'll need faith, with Jesus Christ in the center. Real Christianity means sharing each other's pain.

It is not for us to prophesy the day when men will once more ask God that the world be changed and renewed. But when that day arrives there will be a new language, perhaps quite non religious, but liberating and redeeming, as was Jesus' language. It will shock people, it will shock them by its power, it will be the language of the new truth, proclaiming God's peace with men."

At that point, an SS officer came to take Bonhoeffer to the Flossenbergl concentration camp, where he was executed for his faith just days before the war's end.

You may be confused by Bonhoeffer's phrase, "a new form of Christianity," and also wondering, "What's wrong with the form of Christianity we have now?" But isn't that basically the same question the Pharisees asked Jesus and Martin Luther's opponents asked him?

Instead of "a new form of Christianity," maybe a better word would be "renewal." We Presbyterians like to think we're always "reformed and reforming." That is, we're obligated to be open to the Spirit renewing and transforming us individually and corporately so the Church can effectively bring Christ and his Gospel to a godless world.

So Bonhoeffer, like Martin Luther and our own John Calvin, wasn't advocating abandoning the Biblical Faith for what we'd today call a New Age Religion. Instead, the Great Reformers advocated returning to our roots, the form of Christianity we see lived out in the four Gospels and the Book of Acts, when men and women stuck their necks out to share each others pain and speak the liberating, redeeming language of Jesus, that shocked people by its power, the language of the new truth proclaiming God's peace with men.

Today as we celebrate our freedoms and honor our Founding Fathers, take time to also honor those seventy nameless disciples sent out to proclaim the inevitable coming of God's Kingdom. And then, consider how "we together" at Babcock Presbyterian Church can follow their example, seeing our church in a new way, as a missionary outpost, where together we can be encouraged and nurtured and then sent out to continue the work of the Seventy.

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If it seems terribly overwhelming, leaving you to wonder how can our congregation, with limited resources and me with little extra time do what God requires of us? How can we change the culture of our neighborhood?

A boy was picking up beached starfish and throwing them back into the ocean. A bystander said, "Son, you're trying to do the impossible, there are thousands of them, throwing back a few will make no difference." The boy smiled. "It will make a difference to the ones I throw back."

We have to start somewhere and start with someone. Maybe you can start with the reader mentoring program at Pleasant Plains Elementary or with our other efforts to bring Christ's love to the students and their families, not to benefit our church, but for Christ and his Kingdom.

Luke reports that when the Seventy finished their assignment they "returned with joy." Maybe if we stick our necks out and go out to our mission field, we too will "return with joy" because we made the effort to make a difference for Christ and his Kingdom.