



Sermon from National Bishop Susan C. Johnson

For use by congregations on the Sunday of the Joint Assembly, July 7.

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 7, 2013

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Grace to you and peace in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And greetings to you from your sisters and brothers in Christ from coast to coast to coast that make up our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and our Full Communion partner, the Anglican Church of Canada.

The Gospel lesson appointed for today is a perfect text to come at the culmination of our first ever Joint Assembly, where our two churches have gathered in Ottawa under the theme Together for the love of the world. By this time we will have gathered, worshipped, studied scripture, learned from reports and presentations, debated, made decisions, elected people to positions, and witnessed to our faith on Parliament Hill. Hopefully in the midst of this we will have grown closer as churches, been strengthened and renewed for mission and ministry, and I hope have had some laughter along the way. But now we, and you, are being sent again into the world.

And we are not the first that Jesus has sent out into the world. In the ninth chapter of Luke, Jesus sends out the twelve with a similar mission. Now in today's gospel he sends out the seventy. At the end of his time on earth he sent out all the disciples. And Jesus' call to send us out into the world is part of our baptismal calling. At the end of our baptismal liturgy we say to the newly baptized "We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world."

So what is the new thing that we need to hear about this sending today? It would be too simple to say we are being sent out in pairs, one Anglican and one Lutheran to bear God's creative and redeeming word to all the world. But I do think that remembering that we have partners in this mission is extremely important.

One of the things we will have done at Joint Assembly, and in the business session of National Convention, is to recognize that we are living in challenging and changing times. In some parts of our church we are seeing exciting growth and creativity in mission and outreach. But overall in both our churches we are facing reduced baptized membership, number of congregations and finances. The model of church that we have grown up with seems to be increasingly hard to sustain. We are closing more congregations than we are starting new ones. We are burying more members than we are baptising. And yet we know that our mission and ministry is not over! God is still sending us into the world!

I do not believe that we are being called back to the method of evangelism that the seventy are prescribed. I am certainly not suggesting we all leave church today carrying no purse or bag and wearing no shoes. Neither

do I think we are called to greet no one on the road. In our country, I don't think strangers would welcome you to come and stay with them. And if you found no reception in a town, I don't think people would notice or care if you wiped off the dust from your feet.

But the text does remind us that in every age God has sent and equipped God's people to participate in God's mission in the world. Perhaps one of the reasons that we are facing challenges in our churches these days is that we have become stuck in our ways of doing things. Stuck inside of our church buildings. We have lost that missionary spirit that sends us out into the world. We refer to ourselves as a church *In Mission for Others*, but that is not always our reality.

Now I know this is a generalization, and like all generalizations there are exceptions to the rule—and maybe you are all part of the exception! But in these six years as National Bishop it has been impossible for me to avoid noticing that there are a whole lot of people in our ELCIC, and indeed in all churches, who have forgotten that we are called into the discipleship business and have got it into their heads instead that we are called into the church business.

What I have experienced across our church is many people who have forgotten how to be disciples, but have learned how to be church people. So going to church, supporting the budget of the congregation, serving on the occasional church committee or volunteering in the church in some capacity is what they think following Jesus is about. It is very compartmentalized and often doesn't have much to do with how they live the majority of their lives.

But the reality is we are called to be disciples, to follow the way of Jesus in all of our lives. Jesus didn't come because God so loved the church! He came because God so loved the world! Christianity isn't an institution, but rather a movement whose missionary focus is always directed outward into the world. As such, the things that we do within our communities of faith bear significance only inasmuch as they serve and support that outward movement.

That's why I have been calling our church into Spiritual Renewal. I feel very strongly that God is calling us to a deeper and more spirited discipleship and to a closer daily walk with our Lord. I believe this deeper discipleship includes: Regular attendance at worship; Daily prayer and scripture reading; Yearly involvement in a program of study; Regular service in the community (not just the congregation); Regular and proportional giving similar to the understanding of the tithe found in scripture; and Commitment to sharing the good news with those around us, beginning with our family and friends. Or, in a more simplified list: Pray, Read, Worship, Study, Serve, Give and Tell. The positive response to this call to spiritual renewal has been overwhelming—people tell me they have a real spiritual hunger that they long to fill. And that they need more help from their church to do that.

So how about you? How are you doing at responding to God's call to follow? How are you doing at being sent into the world?

I know it's not easy. And in a culture that prizes things that are easy, fast, and time-saving, a call to a way of life that involves all aspects of your being seems daunting to say the least. There is a cost involved in discipleship, a cost in following the way of our Lord instead of the way of the world. And if you are like me, then there are some days when it is easier than others.

It's a big change for how most of us have been experiencing church and community. We are being asked to consider what opening ourselves up to the new contexts in which we find ourselves might mean for the way we live as the people of God. And yet I also know how by our very nature we are resistant to change. The famous words "but we've always done it this way" can be a mighty barrier to try and break down. The safety of our known church fortresses can end up being like a trap.

Author Annie Dillard puts it this way. "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return."

You know, as human beings, as saints and sinners, we are going to always struggle to discern what God is doing and have the courage to get on board with helping get it done. But it is especially hard in this time of deep change—for us as individuals, for us as communities of faith, for us as middle judicatories, national churches and world communions. Thank God, that our relational God continues to call, love, forgive, equip and send us and will continue to do so until we will finally hear it, get it, and do it!

The best thing is that we are not called to succeed, we are called to be faithful. Let me leave you with these words from Martin Luther.

This life, therefore, is not godliness
but the process of becoming godly,
not health but getting well,
not being but becoming,
not rest but exercise.

We are not now what we shall be,
but we are on the way.

The process is not yet finished,
but it is actively going on.
This is not the goal but it is the right road.

At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle,
but everything is being cleansed.

May it be so with you and with me as we are sent out
Together for the love of the world. **Amen.**