

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. ² He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. ³ Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. ⁴ Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.

⁵ “When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ ⁶ If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. ⁷ Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house.

⁸ “When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. ⁹ Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God is near you.’ ¹⁰ But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, ¹¹ ‘Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.’ ¹² I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. ... “He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me.”

¹⁷ The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.”

¹⁸ He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹ I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. ²⁰ However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (Luke 10:1-12, 16-20)

The Kingdom of God is Near

How long does it take to plan a wedding? If you think about it, the whole thing could be done in a couple of weeks. A couple could decide to get married, go get a license and then ask their pastor to marry them after church one Sunday. I don't think it ever actually happens that way, but it could. You would spare yourselves months of planning and anxiety. But that's not the way we do it, is it? Most people pick a date six months to a year out, and then spend all that time preparing and deciding and obsessing. So when the date starts to get close, how do that bride and groom feel? Excited? Happy? Sure. But aren't they also more than a little stressed?

There might be other feelings, too, because your wedding is a life changing moment. Two people promise in the sight of God to be faithful to each other for as long as they both shall live. Sometimes as that day gets closer, there's a little fear. What if doesn't work out? What if we're not happy? It isn't just wedding days that are like that. Any big, life changing moment can be filled with those conflicting emotions. I've watched my children go away to high school and two of them start college and one leave to spend a year in Germany. As the day that each of those events drew closer, there was both excitement and anxiety. Jesus uses those feelings this morning in our gospel lesson to teach us about life and ministry here on this earth. He points to a bigger day than starting college or even getting married. Twice he tells us **the kingdom of God is near.**

I.

What does he mean by that? In one sense, the kingdom of God comes near whenever we hear the gospel. In another sense, the kingdom of God was near when Jesus said this because he was getting closer to dying and rising to win eternal life for us. But the easiest way to understand Jesus' point is the final meaning: Judgment Day. Judgment Day is coming and you need to be ready. **The kingdom of God is near, so spread that good news.**

If you look carefully at Jesus' words for today, you'll see that he says this twice, once as an announcement of joy for believers and once as a word of warning for unbelievers. On Judgment Day, Jesus is going to raise our bodies and take believers to live with him in joy forever. But for unbelievers, that day will be the day of weeping and terror that the Old Testament so often warns about. Jesus commands his ministers to announce it to both groups to remind us to have a sense of urgency about what we're doing. Judgment Day is coming. We believers need to grow in our faith so that the world doesn't conquer and destroy that faith. And unbelievers need to be warned what's going to happen to them on that day if they don't repent.

Many times in the Bible, God tells us all to be a part of that proclamation. In our lesson for today, however, he focuses on the public ministry. Jesus decided to send out seventy-two disciples in teams of two **“to every town and place he was about to go.”** Jesus was apparently making one last preaching tour as the end of

his life approached. Because his time is short, he sent these teams out to prepare the ground. So Jesus gave them instructions. Some of them were very specific to this situation. He told them not to take a staff or a bag. They were supposed to trust in him to provide for them. He told them not to greet anyone on the road. They were supposed to be focused on their mission. He told them to heal the sick and so forth. Jesus does not give our ministers today all these instructions.

But Jesus also reminded them of things that are generally true for all preachers. He said that the worker is worth his wages. God's people are supposed to support their pastors and teachers. Now, he went on to tell them to stay with the same people and eat whatever they put before them. That doesn't mean we have to have our pastors live with members. That was a specific way in this time and place to follow the principle that members support ministry.

The most important thing that Jesus told them is to announce that the kingdom of God is near. That is the central work that we Christians do. Ministries of mercy, counseling, showing love and care to people in need are all important parts of being a Christian and certainly of being a minister. But the heart of the work God has called me and our teachers to do, is to proclaim that the kingdom of God is near. That's how I build you up. That's how I help you mature in your faith. Now, it is my job to apply that message in a way that addresses the real life situations that we face. But the heart is always the same: Jesus is coming back. We sinners deserve nothing but death and hell when he does. But our Lord laid down his life and paid for our sin. He rose and now heaven is open. God wants us to live with him.

Jesus says something that I think should resonate with us here at Peace right now. He says, "**The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.**" There are so many souls in Livonia and Westland who need to hear the gospel. Last year, we had over ninety children in our school, plus more than twenty others in the preschool. That's not counting our kids at HVL. There is plenty of work to do here. But the laborers are few. How many call meetings have had now, here and at HVL? It's been a long a frustrating process for us, hasn't it?

Jesus tells us to pray for workers. Our God in heaven promises to hear and answer that prayer. It's very frustrating for us to have one call after another declined. In those moments, it's easy to be critical of the call process the synod has set up. Maybe it could work better. But our God tells us to focus on him and what he does for his Church: pray for workers. That's what we need to continuously do here at Peace. I don't know that I have led you in the general prayer for the workers we need as often as I should have. God calls us then to trust that he will hear our prayer and do what is best for our ministry.

Jesus gives us a picture here of how the Church on earth works. Believers gather to proclaim the gospel. They don't all preach sermons or teach Bible class. But they all pray for the gospel to be spread. They all work together to support the ministry God has given us. They all strive to know the word and to be ready to share the word. God has instituted the ministry so that we have men and women who can dedicate their full time to that work. But it isn't just the pastors' or the teachers' work. Jesus gave it to all of us. As we see this world come closer and closer to its end, as we watch the news and see all of Jesus' signs fulfilled, as we read our *Forward in Christ* magazine and see how the gospel truly has reached the whole world, we recognize that the time is growing short. We have important work to do. As children of God, bought by the blood of Christ, let's commit ourselves to sharing that good news.

II.

So when those big life changing days come and we have all those mixed feelings about them, are they good days or bad days? Aren't they usually good days? Hopefully, your wedding day was a day filled with joy, even if you did make yourself a little crazy in the weeks and months before it happened. Hopefully starting college is a blessing, even though we have some well-founded fears for how it will go. When Jesus comes back, is that going to be a good day or a bad day? It will one of the greatest days in history. **The kingdom of God is near, so rejoice that your names are written in heaven.**

When we train our pastors, the second last year of your training is called your vicar year. You go out and spend a year working under a veteran pastor. Most vicars come back to the seminary charged up with excitement for the ministry. I can't help but think about that when I read this account. These seventy-two men went out to preach the gospel and they came back excited. They said, "**Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.**"

Jesus answered and said, **“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.”** What did Jesus mean by that? Some people argue that he’s talking about when Satan rebelled against God and was cast out of heaven right after creation. Other people feel that Jesus means that as they preached and taught and cast out demons, Jesus was watching Satan’s hold on the people crumble. He fell from a great height. I tend to prefer the first explanation, but either way, Jesus is speaking of why it was that they had so much success: the Son of God had given them this power. He goes on to point out that he had given them more miraculous powers and that the enemy could not defeat them. That is still true. God has given us the power of the gospel which still defeats Satan, even though that can be hard for us to see.

But then Jesus said, **“However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”** Obviously, it would be a thrill to have this power. And even though God has not given pastors today the power to drive out demons, there are many joys in the ministry. I get to sit next to the bed of believers and comfort them as their lives come to a close. I get to baptize babies and officiate at weddings and teach children and adults to know their Savior. All those blessings come from God and it’s only natural for a pastor or a teacher to rejoice when God blesses us. But the first and greatest cause of joy – even for a minister – is that we are saved. I’m a sinner who deserves to spend eternity in hell, but I’m saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. If I ever forget that, I will never again be able to do you any good. If I ever forget that I’m going to heaven because of Jesus, my ministry will be meaningless. If I try to keep my attitude positive and my spirits up by pointing to the pleasant things in my ministry, what am I going to do on the hard days? What really matters for me and for all pastors and teachers is that we are going to heaven.

And that isn’t just true for us ministers. God gives all of us tremendous blessings. Of course, we should rejoice and give thanks for those blessings. God gives them to us because he loves us and he wants us to rejoice in them. But you know what? Even the greatest blessings of this life come to an end. Spouses die. Children grow up. We retire from jobs that we loved. We reach a point in our lives when we just can’t do what we used to. Worse, even the greatest joys of this life can be ruined. How many weddings have you been to that were celebrated with great joy, but within a few years, that couple was divorced? How much pain and sorrow came from destroying that gift of God? How many times have people given thanks to God for the job they received, and then learned to hate that job? There is no joy in this life that can’t end or be ruined.

Jesus points us to the greatest of all our joys: our names are written in heaven. We are going home. Not because we’re such good people, but because our Savior laid down his life and paid for our sins. Because he rose from the dead to open the door to heaven for us. Because he called us by the gospel and gave us faith. Our names are written in heaven, and they have been since before God made the world. That’s the one joy that this world cannot ruin because it finds its fulfillment outside this world. When we go to heaven, our hearts will be healed from everything that hurt here. All the heartache will be done and we won’t even have any scars anymore. That promise gives us joy here, even while we struggle. Having that joy is without a doubt, our greatest reason for sharing the gospel.

That day is near. Like all life changing moments, we probably view it with a mixture of anxiety and excitement. But it should not be the cause of fear for us. It is a day of joy, a day of victory, a day when all that Jesus promised us will finally be ours. Look forward to that day. Rejoice in it even while you live down here. Share the promise of that day with others, through your own testimony and through your support and prayers for your church. Amen.