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Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria Virginia
Gospel of Luke 10:1-11

This summer and early fall, we are learning of Jesus's final journey south to Jerusalem. In Luke, there is a strong theme of mission. It is appropriate for us to hear this during our long, green, growing season because it is a time for us to reflect on who Jesus is calling us to be as Christians.

Today, we hear that Jesus appoints 70 disciples to go ahead of him and prepare the townsfolk for his arrival. But it won't be easy for these 70, and in this passage we get a rare glimpse into the details of what it was really like to be a 1st century follower of Jesus. Here is how he instructed them: Go in pairs. Show your trust in God by traveling extremely light. Don't even bring a money belt. Depend on the people that you meet but don't pick and choose. Stay focused! Don't get detoured by chit-chat with other travelers on the road. Cure the sick wherever you go. Expect to feel like lambs among wolves at times, so be ready to wipe off unfriendly dust and just move on. Don't let rejection be any burden. Keep moving forward. Most importantly, when you come to the threshold of a home, proclaim these words: "Peace to this house!"

The proclamation sounds so simple, "Peace to this house", but peace wasn't a prominent feeling in the villages at that time. The Samaritans and the Judeans were in conflict with each other, and all were in conflict with the Roman occupiers. The dream of the Jewish people was for the Messiah to come set things right even if by violence. So for the first words to be "Peace to this house" was like a test to see how the household would respond. Was it a conversation ender, a real door slammer? Or was it an opener to hospitality and deeper relationship? But how could a simple four-syllable proclamation really determine all that?

Well, in this simplicity there is tremendous power. Jesus instructed them, "if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you." This peace isn't just everyday well wishing. It's a thing. It's an entity able to be given, received, accepted or rejected. In our Gospel, it is the peace given to them from Jesus and is now their own. It is the peace that grounds them in God's love. It is theirs to share with others, but if it's not received it remains intact. No harm done.

Theology professor Amy Oden writes, "As we engage others, we must first be well-grounded in God's peace, the peace that passes understanding. God's shalom is more than being calm. It is confidence in God's abiding presence so that we also share that presence with others. Engaging others means not treating them as objects upon which we act, but as sacred others with whom we are called to be fully and peacefully present."

Jesus sent the 72 men and women on this mission of offering the peace that passes understanding to all households, regardless of ethnicity or religious practices. Who they were did not matter. All that mattered was if there was a child of peace in the household who saw the visitors, and themselves, as sacred. If there was, then the offering of peace would rest in this home. Together, they would be fully and peacefully present and new community would be formed.

I'm not sure who said this but someone once said, "The doorway to the Kingdom is the threshold of my neighbor's home." Here's why I agree: It is through this portal that we make family. The doorway to the Kingdom is the threshold of my neighbor's home because the Kingdom is a Kin-dom, a whole new way of looking at relationships. It is whole new family created from people of all backgrounds. When we care for one another as family, the Kingdom of God is very near.

Here is a story of how I experienced this last Sunday. You may have heard the term “supply priest”. This is priest who serves as substitute clergy when needed. For some, this is their entire vocation. Well, in the Diocese of Virginia, there are no Spanish-speaking supply priests! When the vicar of San Gabriel needed time away to go visit his parents in Puerto Rico, we offered to help. So two Sundays ago I drove out to Leesburg for their afternoon service. Like in our gospel, it was a journey. I didn’t go in a pair but I did travel light with just my alb and my phone. I talked with no other drivers along the whole way. Didn’t even wave. I was a little nervous because it was new thing for me, and that’s just my personality. But when I arrived, I found no wolves of course. San Gabriel is a loving and welcoming congregation. The next Sunday, last Sunday, I served as their clergy again. Something happened that warmed my heart.

It was after the dismissal, and I was greeting parishioners as they filed out of the nave. A woman who I had met the previous Sunday approached, and as she did, she pulled out a foil packet from her purse. I had no idea what it was but when she placed it in my hand, it was warm. Knowing I had a long drive home, she had brought a fluffy homemade corn pancake folded over with cheese inside. This gesture was so nurturing because it made me feel like I was more than a visitor. I felt knitted into the San Gabriel family. I felt seen as a person who needs love as much as anyone else.

Now I’m not telling you this story so you’ll start slipping me snacks on the way out. But I hope it illustrates how the Kingdom of God resides in all sorts of spaces that say “I care about you for we are family”. As people in Christ, there is tremendous power in small things. A word, a foil packet, a knock on a door, and even our two fingers when we pass the peace. If the recipient of your gesture doesn’t get it, that’s okay. There will be other days. The Kingdom still came near and our peace that surpasses all understanding remains bedrock. But when it is received? What great joy. The Kingdom, growing community, and healing are there. Jesus is there, and he simply calls us all to be there too so that all may know our peace, God’s peace.