Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Pentecost 9C
Peace, Seattle
July 7, 2013
Luke 10:1-20

THE WAY FORWARD

One of the books I've been reading lately is entitled, CHRISTIANITY AFTER RELIGION, by Diana Butler Bass. Its subtitle: The end of Church and the birth of a new spiritual awakening.[1] Bass, who is widely read among church leaders, is of the opinion that something new is trending in the American religious landscape—and she offers plenty of research to back up her convictions.

The number of those who identify as "spiritual but not religious," a moniker Northwesterners embrace like a birthright, is growing across the nation. So, too, is the number of people claiming no religious affiliation whatsoever—and this is especially true among younger generations.

In fact, New England has now officially replaced the Pacific Northwest as the #1 NONE ZONE—i.e. the region with the highest proportion of people who, when asked about their faith affiliation, check the box marked "NONE."

As the American religious scene continues to diversify, Christianity itself is becoming something different from what it was, but trying to describe the "new thing" it is becoming is difficult and elusive,[2] even for those of us who consider ourselves both "spiritual AND religious."

Bass's thesis is this:

> "Ours is a time of awakening, even a Great Awakening, in line with other such periodic awakenings in North American history, a time of cultural revitalization and reorientation rather than a time of religious apocalypse. Since awakenings are cyclical times of endings and new beginnings…that occur with some regularity [we can] participate in what is happening around us with a sense of awareness, purpose, hope and creative possibility."[3]

Though Jesus launched his public ministry at a time when there was no such thing as the "NONE ZONE," still we can discern in today's gospel reading that change is in the air as Jesus sends out the 70 in teams of 2, to go to every town and village where he himself was planning to go, proclaiming the reign of God.

Using the image of harvest in his motivational send off, he tells them:

> **"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."** (Lk 10:2)

Last summer, we spent our final week of vacation on the Camas Prairie outside of Grangeville, Idaho, with members of Chris' extended family who have been wheat farmers for generations. We arrived just in time for the wheat harvest, and every day Kai and I were up early to help Paul, his son Tuck and their crew prepare the combines and other harvest equipment for a long day in the fields.

As any farmer knows, when the harvest is ready, urgency fills the air. With one eye on the grain and the other on the weather, the farmer does whatever it takes to get the harvest in as quickly and completely as possible.

Jesus knew about harvesting—knew that urgency. Perhaps he'd worked in the wheat or barley fields or the vineyards near his home to help bring in the harvest. Apparently, the mission field to

[1] *Christianity After Religion*, Diana Butler Bass. (New York: HarperCollins, 2012)
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid, p. 31

Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

which his laborers are being sent is so abundant with grain, so ripe and ready to yield their fruit, that there's a rising urgency in his mission, and he impresses this upon the 70.

Of the four gospel writers only Luke speaks of this mission of the 70, and the number is highly symbolic. With 70 known nations and languages in the world at the time, the sending of 70 missionaries is a way of saying: this message announcing God's reign, God's way of being with us and for us for good, isn't meant just for one people, tribe, or nation but all people and all nations.

But it's important to note that this first missionary journey is not a rehearsal in triumph but an apprenticeship in faithful vulnerability:

> **"I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves," Jesus tells them.**
> Leave your smartphones, your credit cards, your luggage—your personal safety net—behind. Instead, trust God to provide what you need along the way. Count on receiving hospitality from others along the way, and get ready to be surprised at who ends up serving as your hosts. When things don't work out, don't let your nose get bent out of joint; leave judgment to God, and move on.

Jesus himself constantly relied on the hospitality of others as an extension of his trust in God and he wants his community of disciples to have this experience as well; to know what it means to live from moment to moment depending on God's grace and guidance and providence.

113 years ago, at the threshold of the 20th century, there was a shared conviction within the church, that the story of Jesus and his love could conceivably reach every nation and people in the world within the next 100 years. The 20th would be THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY.

But at the beginning of the 21st century it's clear that the mission field has moved from some place abroad to our own backyards! The Christian Church on the African continent is the fastest growing church in the world, while in the Northwest and increasingly across the country, up to three quarters of our friends and neighbors are unconnected to a community of faith.

There are many reasons for this decline. The devastating wars of the 20th century are certainly one. How could so-called "Christian nations" who claim faith in the same Lord be responsible for so much genocidal mayhem?

But it's also true that the church, in its missionary zeal, has more often than not done a much better job imitating wolves than sheep. Indigenous communities around the world—including in our own country—bear scars from their encounters with missionaries and mission strategies that mistook enculturation for evangelization.

In this era of red state / blue state political wrangling, it's tempting to be dismiss the rhetoric of any Christian community as politically expedient or self-serving. Today, people are more willing to voice their ANGER against the sins of the church—and to simply say good riddance to an institution that seems perpetually unable to practice what it preaches.

Well, where do we go from here?
Diana Bass writes,

> "What the world needs is better religion, new forms of old faiths…reborn on the basis of deep spiritual connection…we need religion imbued with the spirit of shared humanity and hope, not religions that divide and further fracture the future." p.96

Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

She goes on:

> "To awaken spiritually means that we develop a new awareness of God's energy in the world in order to discern what is needed to open the possibilities for human flourishing…What will make a difference to the future is awakening to a faith that fully communicates God's love—a love that transforms how we believe, what we do, and who we are in the world."[4]

I think she's got something there.

When ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson addressed our synod assembly two months ago, he cautioned against the contagious disease afflicting many congregations—nostalgia!

"Is your congregation smitten with nostalgia for what has been," he asked, "or is its life and mission tipped toward the future?"

With roughly 17% of ELCA congregations growing, 10% holding steady, and 73% in decline, the question is not an academic one. During its first 25 years of existence, our church, like so many others, has been defined more by what DIVIDES us than what UNITES us, and that has to change.

Here at Peace, I think the fundamental orientation of our congregation is a healthy one: caring for one another and for the neighbor. There's a strong sense of hospitality that communicates to those who come through the door: THERE'S ROOM FOR YOU HERE.

And yet so much more that awaits us as we continue to communicate—to EMBODY—the Divine love that is transforming how we believe, what we do, and who we are as the body of Christ in this place.

"The State of the ELCA," said Bishop Hanson, "is lived out wherever you were last Wednesday and wherever you will be next Wednesday," and the same is true for the state of our congregation.

Preparing meals for homeless men, women, and families; volunteering at the Food Bank; giving blood; providing companionship for the homebound; building a neighborhood playground; planting gardens that serve four-legged and winged friends as well as the two-legged ones; telling the coworker who confides in us that we will carry them in our prayers…the list of possibilities is endless.

In this age of shifting alliances, what many are yearning for above all is authentic community. And that is the kind of community we—you and I—get to practice each week, as we come together in a spirit of reconciliation around Christ's holy meal.

We come as we are, not as people who have it all together, but as people who, having been marked with the cross of Christ, risk practicing forgiveness and calling each other sister and brother.

We come as sojourners who, in our search for something to build our lives around, have discovered God's own hospitality at this table.

We come as pilgrims, watching carefully where we place our feet, for we know that our feet are more reliable indicators of what we believe than our words.[5]

And finally, we come as beggars, telling each other where bread may be found; and daring to tell, beyond this building, beyond these doors, that the One who taught us to sing God's story in a new key, is with us still, and with us for good. Amen.

---

[4] Ibid, p. 37

[5] Paraphrase of comments by Bishop Martin Wells at PLU Theological Conf, 6/2007, in recalling advice given to Bishop Hanson at his installation as P. Bishop.