

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

July 3, 2016
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

The Hope in Our Calling

Every 2 years the General Assembly of our denomination meets for 8 days to conduct the affairs of the national church and to provide an opportunity to gather to worship God and to celebrate the unity we have as Presbyterian Christians. While the decisions are made by elected commissioners from each of the 171 regional presbyteries across the country, an equal number of ruling elders and teaching elders (also known as ministers of word and sacrament), many others also attend the meeting as observers and guests to get in on the process as it unfolds and to keep a finger on the pulse of the church. So while there are nearly 600 people there in a voting capacity, twice that number attend in other capacities.

It was in the capacity as observers that Jody and I attended the 2nd half of the recent General Assembly meeting in Portland, Oregon. There's an insert about the assembly in the bulletin today. By the way, 2 students active in our Presby Cats collegiate ministry—Kaycee and Tanner—were at the assembly in the role of young adult advisory delegates. And then to seal the influence of Presby Cats at the assembly, our presbytery's ruling elder commissioner was Emily Keegan of Hysham. Emily was one of the founding members of Presby Cats.

Unlike most of the General Assembly meetings over the last 3 decades that have been marked by controversy and spirited debate over controversial social issues, the assembly this year was more unified and in many ways more forward-looking than recent assemblies. Among the hundreds of decisions that were made and actions that were taken, I want to highlight 3 of them that I think are particularly relevant to the account of Jesus sending out the 70 to do work in his name.

The first is actually the first big decision that is made at any General Assembly meeting—the election of the moderator. The moderator is elected to moderate the proceedings of the assembly and then after the assembly adjourns, the moderator travels across the church interpreting the work of the assembly as well as to strengthen connections between local congregations, and presbyteries over the course of the 2-year term of office. The election this year was historic in 2 ways. For the first time ever 2 women were elected to serve as co-moderators. Both of them pastors, one, an African-American from Washington D.C., Denise Anderson, and the other, a Euro-American from Chicago, Jan Edmiston. It was just 2 years ago that the rules were changed that permitted the possibility of co-moderators, and the assembly took no time to take advantage of this new provision. The second historic aspect of the election this year is at 37 years old, Denise Anderson is the youngest person ever to hold the office of G.A. moderator. That 2 women are heading up our General Assembly is most appropriate since the majority of Presbyterian members are female.

The second decision that I want to highlight as in keeping with today's scripture is the addition of the Belhar Confession to our *Book of Confessions*, the first part of our church's constitution. Now unlike our *Book of Order*, the second part of the constitution, that is amended every 2 years—whenever the General Assembly meets—the process for amending the *Book of Confessions* is more complex and therefore rarely happens. So when it does, it's a big deal. What makes it even a bigger deal this time is that this new addition is the first time we have in our confessional documents a statement that originated in the southern hemisphere and that was composed by people of ethnic origin that is not European based. Originating back in the 1980s when the church in South Africa was struggling with the issue of apartheid where races were treated differently, this confession speaks of the equality that we have in Christ and calls for the pursuit of reconciliation and justice. One of its authors, the Rev. Allan Boesak, who was at the Portland assembly, says of the Belhar Confession, "No other Confession has

been so clear in its intentions: not only unity, but its foundationality; not just reconciliation, but its inescapability; not only justice, but its indivisibility.” (*General Assembly News* • Thursday, June 23, 2016, p. 2) We did an adult study here a few years ago on this confession. It’s thrilling that the process has culminated in its adoption by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The third action by the assembly that is especially noteworthy in light of today’s scripture is the election of a new Stated Clerk of the General Assembly. In our church the Stated Clerk is the highest ranking ongoing full time position in the structure of the church. The assembly elected to a 4-year term an African American pastor, the Rev. J. Herbert Nelson. A native of South Carolina, J. Herbert Nelson comes from a long line of Presbyterians who have been actively involved in the church’s public witness. In his address before the assembly he said he believed the denomination “is not dying, but I believe we are reforming. Only through the eyes of faith can we see beyond death.” He also said the Presbyterian Church can “No longer be 93% white and expect to grow.” He said each Presbyterian can be “a committee of one” working on the issues that divide them. (*General Assembly News* • Saturday, June 25, 2016, p. 7)

These 3 actions—the election of 2 diverse co-moderators, the adoption of the Belhar Confession and the election of a visionary African American Stated Clerk—are evidence that the Holy Spirit is moving within our church to broaden our connection with the world in which we live and minister today. They are evidence that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is poised to engage with the 21st century population. No longer bound by the constriction of past ways of being the church, we are ready to give it our best shot in this time and place.

In Luke’s gospel we come upon this curious event when Jesus, in the middle of his ministry, chooses to appoint 70 others to go out ahead of him in pairs to begin the work that he would then come to take up, after them. This event raises some interesting questions that in and of themselves have something to say to us today.

For example this gathering together of 70 of his followers to send out is intriguing. Most often in our following the story of Jesus we read about the 12 who were his disciples. Sometimes we read of the 12 who were among a larger group of followers. But rarely do we think of Jesus with an entourage of many dozen followers. But here he does just that—appoints 70 others (presumably other than the 12) to be commissioned to go out in his name.

In this commissioning Jesus is making it clear that for this part of his ministry, it’s going to be less about people coming to Jesus to learn from him and to follow; and it’s going to be more about going out to be in and among the people who will be told about God’s loving care.

It’s almost as if Jesus, at this mid-point in his ministry, is becoming aware that if his message is going to make a difference, it’s going to take a bigger strategy to make it happen. So in this commissioning of the 70, Jesus is thinking, and acting, outside of the box. By sending others out, they are planting seeds of his message that will likely germinate, take root and ultimately bear fruit.

While we have heeded this call of Jesus to take his message out and about through the calling, commissioning and sending of missionaries out into the wider world, perhaps it’s time for us to take another look at what this commissioning can mean for us in our 21st century context. Across the history of the church in our lifetimes, most of our efforts have been on doing what we can to make our church family and community an inviting and welcoming place for those who come seeking such a place. Part of that is to do the absolute best job we can when it comes to warmly welcoming those who come to be among us.

As for us as a congregation, I think that we do this pretty well most of the time. Those who have come to be part of our congregation will often speak of the warm and genuine welcome they received when they first came here. This intentional and consistent welcome takes vigilance on our part to ensure that we're on our toes every time that the church doors are open to the world.

The truth of the matter is that there is an increasingly large segment of the population who are so removed from the religious subcultures of our society that there is almost no chance that they will ever choose to stop by for a visit. It's time for us to follow Jesus' lead and to find ways for us to go out into the circles of our lives that do not intersect with the church and begin to think about how we can be Jesus to them. Does that mean inviting them to come to our church? Perhaps. But it's more likely in our day that it will be less about getting them to come to us and more about us coming to them where they are. It means that as we live our lives in our daily routines that we do so with an awareness of how I do what I do reflects the loving kindness of Jesus. It means that as we participate in the structures of our world today that the values of inclusion, reconciliation, and love inform the decisions that we make. It means that we learn to see ourselves not as autonomous individuals, but rather as a part of God's community of love.

As the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is broadening its participation in the world through the election of diverse and representative leaders, and as it binds itself to our brothers and sisters around the world who have affirmed the truths in the Belhar Confession, we too are being called and commissioned by Jesus to go ahead to a new place where we can take his love, show his love and share his love.

I close with some of the words of our new Belhar Confession that affirm the unity we have in Christ. We believe:

- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity.