

Pastor Bradley Schmeling
Sermon

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 + Sixth Sunday after Pentecost + July 8, 2007 + St. John's Lutheran Church, Atlanta

Peace be on this house.

I hardly know how to begin the sermon today. When we left worship last week, we had no idea that a decision of the Committee on Appeals would be rendered in less than 24 hours. Most of us were thinking that we only had two days of work before the mid-week holiday. I spent part of Sunday afternoon looking at Fourth-of-July recipes. There was a berry-peach cobbler that looked fantastic. The magazine is still lying open in the place where I left it that afternoon. As many of you already know, the decision to remove me from the clergy roster of the ELCA was rendered by email to my faithful attorney, Jane Fahey, at about noon on Monday. The decision granted each point of the bishop's cross appeal: removal from the roster immediately, no grace period; chastisement to the hearing committee for offering its opinion and for setting an August 15th date.

In the past week, the congregation met to hear the news, to grieve, to pray, to plan. The officers of this congregation spent the week listening to your questions and your anxieties. We spoke with the bishop, and our executive committee plans to meet with him in early August to continue the conversation we've always had about how we, St. John's Lutheran Church, can be a healing, loving, committed presence in the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA.

When the synod came to us last year and asked us to leave the ELCA, we were clear about our desire to be part of the body. It is our desire to move forward carefully, with deliberation, providing opportunities for everyone in this congregation, as well as those who walk beside us, to talk and to dream about our congregation's mission. What has seemed abundantly clear to all of us is that we have been sent by Christ to give witness to our neighborhood and our church that the reign of God has come near.

And we want to be clear that this desire to participate in the ELCA should not be construed as defiance. It grows out of a deep and profound belief that in Jesus Christ the church is already one, and our responsibility is to be brothers and sisters, even in the midst of painful and difficult disagreements. As our bishop-elect, Julian Gordy, has said, "When the church is in disagreement, no one can be excused from the table."

When I was referred to, in a letter from the synod, as "former pastor Bradley Schmeling," I'll admit I felt excused from the table. And I'll admit to you, my brothers and sisters, that the week has been hard. I don't want to pretend that this has been easy, and I don't want to sugar-coat the violence of the committee's decision. I love the Lutheran church. Twenty-two years ago I started seminary, and, as many of you probably understand, my identity has been bound up in my call to serve the church. On Tuesday, our treasurer called the Board of Pensions, which administers the church's health benefits, to find out what happens to my health insurance. He conferenced me into the call, and a very cheerful woman, clearly from Minnesota, said, "It's very simple. You can keep all your benefits as long as you are employed by a congregation of

the ELCA. You just need to send in a form that says that your call has been terminated and that you request a change in status from clergy to lay.”

On Thursday afternoon, when we had the press conference, one of the reporters asked me, “What are you going to say on Sunday?” I told her honestly that I had no idea and that I would certainly be praying for the Holy Spirit to give me guidance. But it wasn’t until Friday morning that I really sat down with the Scripture and noticed the power of the gospel text that was appointed for today.

It made me glad to be a church that uses a lectionary, a set of assigned readings for each Sunday. Because I might not have been bold enough to choose this gospel text from Luke 10. It practically speaks for itself. It might have even been enough to read it and simply sit down. But, of course, whether you’re rostered or not, a preacher can’t just sit down! When you’re called, you’re called.

As I read the gospel, it struck me that, oh no, Jesus was giving me my walking papers, too! Actually, these are instructions for the whole church, all of us:

- Go on your way.
- Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals. God will provide what you need along the way.
- Don’t stop on the road for distracting conversation.
- Find a place that understands the message, and work from there.
- Stay there until the mission is complete.
- Be a healing presence.
- And my mother’s favorite: Eat everything on your plate.

Jesus even provides a realistic set of expectations:

- There will be times when it feels like you’re a lamb in the midst of wolves.
- Some will hear the message; others will refuse.
- Don’t take it to heart.
- The message isn’t any less powerful because some can’t hear it.
- The reign of God is still near to everybody, whether they know it or not. The tragedy isn’t that you weren’t listened to; that your own story wasn’t heard; the tragedy is that they’re missing out on God’s peace.
- Just get up, dust yourself off, and move on.

Let me just say a word about the phrase, “Shaking the dust off your feet in protest.” It is a way of saying “I’m not going to live in your dirt.” Patterns that don’t welcome, words that don’t heal, tables that don’t feed the hungry, are left behind. To shake the dust off our feet is not to reject or to judge human beings but to say that our mission of healing, forgiveness and compassion is more important than getting stuck in the quicksand of revenge or judgment. Shaking the dust off our feet as a church is a way of saying that our mission to this neighborhood, to the hungry, the homeless, the sad, the dying, the wounded, can’t get caught in the dust storm that is swirling around us. It is not a denial of the pain and frustration of life in the church, but a call to move through it, not getting stuck.

Jesus goes on in the text to remind us, too, that there will be times when, in a flash of lightening, in the blink of an eye, you will see walls fall down and pathways opened up. You'll make your way through all kinds of evil things; things that are even worse than stepping on snakes or finding a scorpion in your shoe. You're going to see evil defeated. There will be moments for all of you when you recognize that you have more power than every evil thing around you.

Jesus even answered my question about what I would say this morning: Peace be on this house. These are the words spoken to our hearts when pain and anger are not far from the surface. These are the words that are spoken when we're wondering what is next. These are the words that we are given to say to one another in the coming months. These are the words that we are called to offer a world that is mired in violence and war. Peace be on this house. And, ironically, these are the words that we are handed to us by Jesus to say to the entire house of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: Peace be on this whole house.

This is our prayer for the whole church; that we become a house where everyone finds peacefulness; where everyone has a place at the table and is encouraged to eat the food that is offered in gracious communion. Peace be on this house that is divided and struggling. Peace be on this house when it is afraid about reformation. Peace be upon this house as it gathers in assembly.

Time will teach us the meaning of the events of this past week. But the promise from Jesus is that the reign of God has drawn near. It is present in this week, and it is present in the week and years to come. It is present in this Scripture read. It will be present at this table in front of you. It will be present when we are sent out to the neighborhood. It will be present whether we win or lose, or whether we're wildly successful or miserable failures.

Hear that word, you priesthood of believers: The reign of God has drawn near to *you*. I love that our gospel text ends with a rostering. Rejoice that your name is written in heaven. This is the rostering that no committee can change. This is the rostering that is conferred by Jesus in baptism. This is the rostering that no life circumstance can erase. This is the rostering that leads to a call. This is the roster that brings the fullness of heaven to the community of earth.

Let the last word of the gospel be the first word for the future:

Rejoice that your name is written in heaven.