

St. Bartholomew’s Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

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Scripture: Mark 6: 7-13

“Time To Shake Off The Dust!”

I think the timing is quite ironic that just last week Fr. Molison was speaking about prayer and fasting in preparation for Fr. Ward and me, as two weeks from now we will be traveling to Pittsburgh to attend an Anglican Communion Network Council meeting. No doubt that there are just as many others who are being sent out from their congregations or convocations – charged with getting a message out – loudly and strongly proclaiming that we are indeed on the Lord’s side. In today’s Gospel – Jesus’ sending the disciples out “two by two” was a sign that God’s kingdom was breaking in - at last. It was urgent to get this message out – and for the disciples to take the bare minimum with them – obediently relying on local hospitality, focusing only on the task at hand. They were given a task by Jesus, with specific instructions – to be followed to the letter. Jesus was specific to them in how they were to carry out His message, and we will talk more about that in a few moments.

During the first week of my vacation – right smack dab in the middle of General Convention – during my daily office readings – I was stopped dead in my tracks by one of the readings. My immediate thought was “you’ve got to be kidding!” “We are seeing the very same thing being done.” The reading was Numbers 20: 1-13, and I really couldn’t believe the correlation – and then its direct connection to today’s Gospel reading from Mark. Let me share some of the verses with you: **Numbers 20:7-8** *“The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.”*

It goes on in verses 11-12: **Numbers 20:11-12** *“Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.””*

Moses was given clear instructions by God – to go, take his staff, with Aaron and speak to the rock and it will give water. He said nothing about using the staff – or hitting anything. Moses had a touch of Frank Sinatra – to do it his way – and struck the rock – not once – but twice. Could He do what he was told? Could he be obedient to the creator of the water, of the rock, of everything? But Nooooooo! We can make fun all we want – but the fact remains that the God of the Universe, the God of detail gave clear instructions – and mankind couldn’t follow them. This of course was not the first time – remember the Garden of Eden? It certainly wouldn’t be the last. God wanted to show the people His power and His majesty – but Moses couldn’t follow God’s will. God clearly told Him what to do – but Moses had a better idea! And because of that, both Moses and Aaron paid the penalty – they did not get to go to the Promised Land – and died instead. Don’t put words – or actions in God’s mouth; His Word does His speaking.

Jesus chose His twelve to be special leaders – to be “fishers of men.” They were hard workers, who would also have to be special followers – people who could follow orders. Jesus clearly instructed them *“and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.”* (**Mark 6: 7-9**) They were called to be “kingdom heralds” warning people that something was about to happen and that **everyone should get ready for it.**

Do you remember the E.B.S. tests that you would hear on the radio? It would say “This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. The Broadcasters in your area in cooperation with... (yada, yada, yada) This is only a test! Then you would hear a loud tone that made you want to turn off the radio – followed by the words: “Had this been an actual emergency you would have been instructed...” Well, you know the rest. I must have executed hundreds of these tests over my 30+ years as a radio DJ and each time it was a matter of having to check the wire services (yes, we actually had teletype machines) to make sure that this was not the real thing happening. Every station has an E.B.S. monitor that can go off and when it does you must listen for instructions. There is a special packet hanging on the wall from the FCC that has two sealed envelopes in it: one is yellow, and one is red. If you were instructed to open the yellow one – it would be quite serious, full of evacuation instructions and more. But if you had to open the red one it was much more than serious – it contained instructions for survival in the face of an actual impending nuclear attack or disaster that was happening. It was, and still is all about preparation – getting ready – to survive.

Jesus’ message that the twelve brought to these people was the equivalent of the red envelope – survival instructions. Following the instructions meant one’s eternal survival. **Getting ready would mean repenting:** not just feeling sorry for particular sins, or “expressing regret” for straining the bonds of a relationship, but changing one’s entire outlook and aims in life. Jesus’ agenda left **no room for compromise**, and certainly **no time to waste**.

- You know what – Jesus’ agenda hasn’t changed, at least He hasn’t changed it –
- but others have tried to,
- and others still have said that the Spirit has changed it!
- Jesus’ agenda of going to the cross – to pay the price for each of our sins – has not changed – and neither has our end of it – repenting for our sins.

Jesus anticipated that some places would not welcome His message with open arms. You see, sadly, there are some people who would rather stay sick - than face **the “in your face” challenge of a new way of life, a transformed way of life**, a whole new moral outlook. That is why the only response that Jesus’ disciples were to have was clearly symbolic – **shaking the dust of that place off their feet**. “Shaking the dust off” meant essentially treating these Jewish cities as if they were unclean, pagan cities, the dust of which the true followers of God would not want remaining on them.

Oh, my goodness, how much easier it would have been for the twelve to show resentment and anger at the rejection by those people, but there was no time to waste. Jesus’ mission was on an incredible, breathless pace – there was no time to waste and they would have to go and move on to the next place – and **may God have mercy upon those who missed their chance**.

Jesus was not sending the disciples out on a training mission –

- this was not a test –
- or a divine act of delegation of power –
- but instead this was deeply symbolic act of witness to the Israel of Jesus’ day as to just what time it was in God’s Almighty and urgent timetable.

Israel’s history – in fact the history of the whole world was racing toward a dramatic climax – a showdown that would take place on a cross at Calvary.

In obedience, the twelve preached repentance, drove out demons and healed many sick people. Jesus **gave them authority**: the "right" and the "power" **over evil spirits**. This power to exorcise demons would authenticate their preaching, and their authority. Remember, these were not just some guys off the street, but these were men who worked very closely with the Lord Jesus and knew that His power extended far beyond His personal presence. His instructions were very real. This was not negotiable – and they had to hurry to do the task at hand. This was truly the coming of the Kingdom of God.

In Jesus' sending the disciples - they were going to carry out the very things that He would do if He were there. Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we are looking at the original example of "*What Would Jesus Do!*" The Twelve were sent to preach the Word and lead people to trust the one and only Savior of the World – Jesus Christ – and to repent of their sins. His death on the cross was coming – and people needed to get ready. These disciples would have a calling, later, that they would receive – on which they would act more fully - in the time after Jesus ascended to heaven. **Mark 16:20** "*And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.*" **Matthew 28: 19-20** reminds us that before Jesus went to be with the Father – His words sent each one of His true followers on a mission: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"

Jesus' detailed instruction to the disciples to go out two by two was a call specifically meant for that particular point in time - facing the coming crisis; the greatest crisis, that of the death of Jesus on the cross. We are well aware that the church itself would be faced with crisis after crisis at various points throughout its history ever since. Part of true Christian discipleship is the **spiritual sensitivity and discernment to know when there is an emergency – and then - what to do regarding it.**

The moral decay that is rapidly changing the face of society is frightening – where some can, and will justify anything – just because they will not submit to anyone's authority but their own. Instead they cry out – "because I want to!" "It's my right!" "It's who I am, the real me!" "Accept ME just the way I am!" Oh, and their favorite- "*Don't judge me!*"

I am sure we could all spend hours recalling the number of times that we have heard the words of Matthew 7:1 "Judge not – so that you might not be judged." The ones who deny the very authority of Holy Scripture – use it to justify their own needs – when it suits them. This "I, Me, Mine" fellowship of the church has led us down a road that is pure disaster – and anything but Biblical. Biblical – now there's a novel idea! What specific instruction does the Word of God have to say about dealing with the "Church of I, Me, Mine"? **2 Timothy 4:3-5** "*For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*"

We, in our recent history have been called, like the twelve disciples, to go - urgently – with limited baggage or distraction, to warn people that **the world is heading rapidly in the wrong direction** – and to show to the world that evil has been defeated through Jesus and can be defeated again today. Like the Twelve who were instructed by Jesus to depend on God to provide for their food and shelter through the hospitality of Jewish households - we are called to do the same thing. We are not to get hung up about stuff – like buildings and property. Oh indeed, they are very important – but God will provide for the faithful who do His work and preach His Gospel – and no other! Our focus has got to be on Jesus' work - on Jesus' message – without delay. Hear what St. Paul said to the Galatians:

(Galatians 1:6-9) *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!"*

The one true Gospel of Jesus Christ is a life giving and transforming Gospel – one that changes us – and does not need for us to change it – or replace it with a social gospel full of Millennium Development Goals. Brothers and Sisters – Jesus has given us a charge – we have been called to open the red envelope – the instructions for survival – in Him.

Getting ready means repenting: not just feeling sorry for particular sins, or “expressing regret” for straining the bonds of a relationship, but changing one’s entire outlook and aims in life. Jesus’ agenda has **no room for compromise**, and there is certainly **no time to waste**.

- Remember - Jesus’ agenda has not changed,
- but others keep trying to,
- and then there are still others who maintain that some “spirit” is changing it! I don’t know who that spirit is but it is certainly not the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus’ agenda of going to the cross – to pay the price for each of our sins – has not changed – and neither has our end of it – repenting for our sins.

Paul’s words to the church in Ephesus – could just as well be words to the faithful today:

(Ephesians 5:5-9) *"Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be associated with them. For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light-- for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true."*

(John 14:6) Jesus said: *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* **He is the truth!** – **(John 8:31-32)** Jesus said *"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."* If we really are to be free and to call ourselves disciple of Jesus Christ – Christians – then we must follow His instructions. We are not to add to them – or to do our own thing – like Moses and the rock – but we are to be gratefully obedient – and do His Word. **James 1:22** says *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."*

My brothers and sisters in Christ – it is time for us to get busy doing the business of the Gospel – following the instructions of Jesus - spreading and teaching the Word, preaching repentance, baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Those are our marching orders! I do believe it is time to shake off the dust - and **may God have mercy upon those who missed their chance**.