

July 1, 2007

Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Sermon: "That's an Order!"

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Text: "*carry no purse, no bag, no sandals, and greet no one on the road.*"

None of us likes to take orders, or to be ordered around by anyone. It's just a part of our nature to hate it.

I remember a story I was told years ago by (I think) Fountain Odom. It's about a "flat-lander" from Charlotte who was staying at his weekend get-away cabin somewhere up in the Smokey Mountains. Winter was setting in, so the man went to one of his neighbors – a local in those parts.

"Morning Mr. Black; I want to order some firewood."

"Too bad," replied Mr. Black. "I don't take orders from nobody."

Jesus gathers seventy of his disciples together one day, and then orders them to go on ahead of him, two-by-two, to prepare the towns and villages for his coming. Among his marching orders, is this command, "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals, and greet no one on the road."

Now, for young preachers just starting out on the road to ministry, doesn't that sound like pretty poor advice? I mean, you'd think that what young ministers fresh out of seminary need to hear most would be just the opposite:

“Open a savings account at the local bank, and don't let the balance get too low.”

“Establish your credit early because, on your salaries, there'll be time when you'll need to make time payments.”

“Wear nice shoes; people notice such things. And first impressions mean a lot.”

“Get some good luggage, because you'll probably be traveling a lot.”

“Oh, and whatever you do, be friendly to everyone. You never know when that stranger may be an angel in disguise.”

That's the kind of advice you'd think Jesus should be giving to these seventy young students of the gospel, right?

A few years ago, with a grant from the Lilly Foundation, a group of seminary professors got together and tried to come up

with a means for measuring when people are ready for entering the ministry. The result of their work, as you can imagine, was a book so thick it exhausted me just looking at it. In it they listed all the areas of competence they thought were necessary for readiness in ministry: a knowledge of the Bible, preferably the ability to read it in both Hebrew and Greek; a pleasing personality; psychological knowledge; and so on, and so forth.

Imagine, if you will, Jesus sending his students into the world on that day. A big crowd stands there: Seventy people plus their supporters. Jesus says that he's getting ready to send them out. He tells them that they must go out in pairs, two-by-two.

Why two-by-two?

Today we might call this "the buddy system." Jesus is saying, "I want each of you to get with a buddy. The road ahead will be long and arduous. The going will get tough. Best team up with another buddy and support one another.

Wasn't that what we learned at summer camp? You couldn't go out into the really deep water unless you swam with your buddy.

Then Jesus tells them to go to a specific place with a specific message. It's a message that tells people to get ready for some mysterious future that God has in store for each of them. Does that sound like something you and I could accept today, from the voice of a stranger who comes knocking on our door?

A friend of mine is a Methodist preacher in South Carolina. He tells about one year when they held their Annual Conference. The last day, the last hour of the Conference, the bishop would read out the pastoral appointments for the coming year. It's always a dramatic moment.

This one year, as the names and appointments were being read, one poor fellow in the back, as it was revealed where they were moving him to, cried out, "Good Lord, they ruined me!"

Notice in this story that Jesus never tells the disciples what is going to happen to them exactly after they follow his instructions.

Obviously, something very risky and dangerous is going on here.

But what?

One Bible commentator says that he believes the disciples are traveling “under sealed orders.” Before a difficult, perilous voyage, the captain of a navy ship will sometimes be given sealed orders. If you’ve seen the movie *The Hunt for Red October* or read the book by Tom Clancy, you’ll recall that similar “sealed orders” play a significant role in the story. Such orders are not to be opened until the ship is well under way. That’s because, if the sailors knew the destination in advance, they probably wouldn’t sail in the first place!

It’s also a matter of secrecy. When the Allied Armies launched the Normandy Invasion on D-Day, June 6, 1944, they knew they were assaulting Hitler’s European Fortress. But it wasn’t until after all the boats had pulled away from shore in England that the troops knew they would be landing at the Normandy beaches. None of them knew exactly where they were going until they got there.

Luke says that is exactly the way the seventy were sent out – under sealed orders. Somehow, in their work, they were going to be part of Jesus’ greater plan for the victory of the kingdom of God. They just didn’t know all the specifics.

Jesus tells them to keep silence on the way. Maybe he didn’t want them mouthing off in case there were informants – spies – who would report back to the Pharisees what he was doing. At other points in the Gospels, Jesus strictly charges people not to tell others that they have been miraculously healed, because it was not yet the right time to reveal such things. Something big, something risky, something miraculous was going to happen, for sure, but Jesus didn’t want his disciples to “spill the beans.”

And I think you and I can identify with this, today, can’t we? Like those early disciples, you and I are sent out, too. Maybe we don’t think of ourselves as numbered among the inner circle of Jesus’ apostles, but we certainly do qualify as disciples in the larger sense. We are more like the seventy he sent out than the Twelve who knew him best.

And I think this story tells us a number of things. It tells us that being a part of the seventy, being part of those who are sent out, is not always an easy thing. There's going to be stress, tension, an element of risk, and great uncertainty. My friends, if you go out in Jesus' name, under his orders, it's going to be rough, according to this story of the first followers of Jesus

Another thing the story tells us is that being sent out requires that you let go of a lot of baggage. You need to be able to move quickly – not too many burdens; not too many hindrances. Some of the things that burden other people shouldn't burden us. Not because we want to be free of all burdens, but because we want to bear the right burdens.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, used to insist that his circuit riders take just a few belongings with them as they rode into the country to spread the gospel. He knew that our possessions have a way of hindering us. His circuit riders were expected to “travel light.”

In our own time, I think of Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, and author of The Cotton Patch Bible. He's sometimes referred to as a theologian in overalls. In everything he was marked by a simplicity of spirit and life. His courageous stands on behalf of racial equality and social justice are a challenge to all sincere Christians to learn what it means to "love not the world nor the things of the world," but to love Jesus more.

Yet, this much said about the anxiety that lay ahead, there must have been a lot of excitement among the disciples, too. As well as a lot of anticipation, because what we're reading about here is an adventure. And part of the adventure of going on an adventure is that we're not quite sure what to expect. We don't know how things are going to end. How they'll turn out. And don't we all inwardly yearn for going on adventures? I think we do.

Jim McClendon is a Baptist preacher who has written a book. In it, he tells of the time when he presented himself for baptism as a young man. As he was being interviewed prior to baptism, his pastor threw a question at him that was really a test of his sincerity.

He asked the boy if he would be willing to give his life to God to be a missionary, maybe even to be sent to Africa and to have to endure all sorts of dangers and hardships there.

Young McClendon answered enthusiastically, “Yes!” Of course he was willing!

He says that shows how little that preacher knew about the mind of a young teenager. We all like challenges. At certain stages in our lives, the bigger and riskier the better. All of us are busy giving our lives to something. Why not give them for something exciting?

Jesus tells the seventy to keep quiet about their work, to do as they’re told, to move quickly and lightly about their mission. But it’s clear that they’re part of a larger mission that’s not yet completely unfolded, a mission whose final goal is even unfolding, a fierce battle whose end is not yet in sight.

And aren’t we all?

You and I are part of the mission that is not yet ended. Maybe Jesus was sending them out as sort of an advance party.

Luke says they're being sent out where Jesus himself was about to go. Much had to be done.

They were traveling under sealed orders. They didn't know the whole battle plan. They might know some of the tactical objectives, the immediate objectives in the campaign, but they had no idea of the strategic objectives, the long-range plans. All of that had yet to be revealed. And so has it yet to be revealed to us.

We go out, we leave church, we go back to wherever we came from. We labor in our little situations. We try to be as faithful as we can. But like them, the seventy, we're working under sealed orders. It has not yet been revealed to us how all of this will work out.

The good news is that God has graciously chosen us to be sent out in his name. We are privileged to be a part of God's way of turning the whole world upside down! So, take care on the road!