

Nathan Willard  
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The Congregational Church UCC, Iowa City  
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near."

'Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.'

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

### **The Freedom to Act**

I hope you had a good Fourth of July this week. It was conveniently toward the end of the week, and I know I spent the day walking and driving around Iowa City, looking at the small flag displays, some backyard barbecues and some frontyard games that I'm not really sure about, but involved disc golf goals and many cups of beer. The students of Iowa City, I see, have continued to be creative in my absence. But, in the interludes between drives and walks on that day, I thought back to the seven years I spent in Boston, particularly when I saw the Facebook updates from my still-resident friends, one of whom reported that there were police officers every 100 feet along the Charles Street Bridge between Cambridge and Boston. And I looked around for any television coverage of Pops Goes the Fourth on the Esplanada, but I guess that A&E does not broadcast any of that anymore, and so I couldn't find it. But I did see some news reports saying that not only were there police officers every hundred feet along the bridge, but because as many of you now know, the Tsaranev brothers did not intend at first to bomb the Boston marathon, but instead the Fourth of July, that no bags were allowed on the Esplanade and people were being searched just in case anyone was inspired by the violence and chaos that they had caused. So we see heightened security there, and I wondered if that meant no more picnics. Because, in the seven years I lived in Boston, and this is how you know I truly went native, I did

not attend one Fourth of July concert on the Esplanade. I only did that in 1999 when I was visiting my friend Greg Cross from Iowa City days, who at that time lived in Boston. But in 1999, when I was a tourist for the Fourth of July in Boston, I brought a full picnic lunch and a blanket to the Esplanade. I walked across the Boston Common, and walked down to the banks of the Charles River, and laid out my blanket and sat and baked in the sun, until about 15 minutes before the end of the concert, when I snuck off to a better view of the fireworks from a bridge. And I wondered if people could still do that. And I was sorry that fear of attack had made it less possible for this generation of concertgoers and of Americans to enjoy that longstanding tradition of listening to the local band concert while enjoying a picnic dinner in the grass. The fear of the unknown, coming close to home on a day that celebrates the way we recreate our notions of Freedom every year and every generation.

I've long thought of the Fourth as a way to remember that we used to think of freedom as the right of wealthy white men to decline the payment of taxes for necessary services, later expanding it to mean the freedom not to be owned by another human being and, finally, for all adults to have a say in their government, among other things. And I thought about all the people over the years who saw the limitations of the current definition of freedom, and felt called upon to do something about it.

In Luke's gospel story, Jesus sends out seventy (or seventy-two) followers to 35 or 36 different places he might come to visit, charging them to leave immediately, stopping not even to pick up sandals or moneybags, not even to slow down to talk to anyone on the road. And he did not say, "And you will go and find riches there," "and you will go and find food there, so go and be welcomed with open arms." No, he said he was sending you out like lambs in the midst of wolves. And so you wonder if one or two of those disciples might have said, "um. Can I have a day to gather my things together before I go, maybe set up a store of food against what I might find in front of me? Um, maybe go next time? Maybe wait for you to come with me?" But Jesus had foreclosed that opportunity. He said, no, the urgency is so great, you must not stop to prepare yourselves. You are as prepared as you will ever be, you will not have even the safeguards of hospitality to rely upon, as I'm going to make you a burden on some family, you must stay with them and accept their food and do work for the food, because you deserve to be paid. You deserve not to go around from house to house saying, I am a guest in your house, please feed me, but instead you must stay with a family, because a laborer deserves to be paid. You will be worthy of their payment. So they have to go right away. With urgency. No preparation. Go and do the work he has asked, and that will be enough to survive and succeed.

When they come back, these scouts are amazed at what they have been able to do—they've cast out demons. They have healed the sick, the very things that Jesus has just been doing in front of them. They survived and they thrived in Jesus's absence. They did not think they were prepared for their mission, but they answered the call and found new abilities they had not known they possessed. And when they came back, they said, "It's amazing! Even the demons submit to us!" And Jesus tells them, well what did you think was going to happen? Did you think I was going to send you without giving you the power to overcome the obstacles in your path? But don't rejoice because you can cast out demons. Rejoice because you are with me. See, Jesus does a clever thing here. He shows them what they can accomplish when they are called up on to do it, what reserves of strength and confidence they might find for themselves when working without a

safety net. Because Jesus knows they will have to work without a safety net at some point, when he is gone. So he gives them a taste of what they can accomplish without him, to give them confidence and hope for the future. He says, when you must, you will be able to bring the peace to the world that I wish to see. When called, you will be able to serve. This is the freedom I give you.

And when reading this, and picturing the scenes at all the events on Thursday, I thought about that strength and that freedom from our own fears and doubts that Jesus gives to us in this commissioning. I think of the women and men who took up the mantle of abolition, and were assaulted and beaten and killed by their lawful owners because of it. I think of the people who were called to guarantee the right of all people to vote and were threatened, harassed, assaulted and killed because of it. I think of the suffragettes and women who fight to this day to disabuse people of the notion that women are somehow less for being women. And I think of the people who ran 26.2 miles, and then said, I will run a mile more carrying the wounded, if that's what's needed. All these people could have found a reason to delay, could have found a way to escape the call without being blamed by us or by their neighbors or by their family, but the urgency was too great and I thought, what prescience Jesus had, to see the capacities for good and change that we have if only we can get out of our own heads, erase our doubts, and move forward. I think of all the people who saw an impossible job, a job they had not been prepared for, a job they were not equipped for, but a job that needed doing, and then did it. And that's why Jesus's last line, the line we may be a little uncomfortable with here, in our liberal protestant church, is so important. Do not rejoice at the power and the strength that you have, he says, do not rejoice that you have succeeded in conquering demons. That's the wrong way round. No, rejoice that you are with me. And you will be with me. It is not the accomplishment that saves you, it is not the work that saves you. The accomplishment and work come because you have conquered fear and taken up the task. By accepting the call, you have already won. It isn't about the demons. It isn't about the healing. Those things will come, or won't. It's about seeing the task in front of you and saying, "I am good enough. I am worthy enough. It doesn't matter if someone else might do this job better. I am here now, and the job is in front of me." We see it in the extraordinary every week, and we celebrate it, and wonder whether we could do the same. Jesus tells us, yes, we can. When called upon, we will be able to do great things, if only we let ourselves.