

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

The apostle Paul never knew Jesus in his lifetime. Jesus had already been crucified and his movement carried on by his followers before Paul heard of him. We know that because of the nature of Paul's initial opposition (when he was called Saul). As an educated Jew, he knew that God's messiah could not be executed, and particularly not by "hanging from a tree," which Leviticus says is a particularly cursed method of execution. To say that someone who had that happen to him was God's messiah was to throw really ugly shade at God. So Saul did everything he could to shut down the Jesus movement, to defend God's reputation.

What changed his mind was his mystical experience of the risen Christ speaking directly to him. And once he was convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead, he had to reinterpret what his execution had meant, and his conclusion was that the end of times was here, and that the risen Christ was the "first fruits" of the harvest that God was producing, and all the rest of us would be coming along shortly, just like your tomatoes do after the first one ripens. SO that was the core of Paul's message. He even told the church at Corinth, in his first letter, "I resolved to know nothing among you but Christ, and him crucified." And he did.

Contrast that with Jesus' missionary message, as he sends his disciples out ahead of him in pairs: "When a town's 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.'" This may be a different kind of apocalyptic message. The kingdom of God comes to be known through acceptance of people as they are—eating what they give you—and by healing. To the extent that people remain apart from the kingdom, it will be by their disposition toward acceptance. If anyone in the house you enter "shares in peace," peace rests on them; but if they do not, peace will

return to the disciple. Paul spent a lot of time arguing against what he called “false teachers.” Jesus seems to have a less propositional approach to teaching—just enact the kingdom, and people can articulate it however they please.

I’m not actually criticizing Paul here, because Paul wasn’t Jesus. I’m just highlighting the differences between their approaches. Paul was steeped in learned argument, and Jesus was steeped in the reality of God.

But so step back, and let’s picture this. Jesus has decided to scale up his project, and he’s sending out his disciples in pairs as advance men and women to introduce the message of the kingdom. The disciples are not a well-oiled machine. They’re a motley crew, from Simon the Zealot who would have wanted to overthrow the Roman Empire to Levi the tax collector who had been sort of a collaborator with the empire. There’s Mary Magdalene, who was apparently a woman of high intellect, and probably some others who were following because of a personal healing or some other powerful experience. Jesus must have looked at them and thought, “I sure hope this doesn’t blow up in my face.”

And he’s sending them out to who knows what. He certainly doesn’t. All he can tell them is that they’re going to be like lambs in the midst of wolves. They are to carry minimal supplies, and “greet no one on the road,” which is sort of funny—I think it’s because “greeting on the road” was more than just the raising of one finger off the steering wheel. It must have involved literally stopping, talking about where each one had come from and where each was going, inquiry into whether they had friends or family in common, if so, greetings to those people, possibly the sharing of a snack . . . I admit, I’m basing this on my experience of 21st-century Afghan Americans, but why else would you not greet people on the road, except that it

would slow you down?

And as I said, nobody knows really who they're going to. Jesus explicitly says the disciples have to stay in the first house to which they're invited and eat whatever they offer. I mean, they could stumble into a non-Jewish household and be given pork. All that matters is that the disciples enact the kingdom in whatever way seems called for, and whoever listens to them is listening to Jesus himself.

Here's what I think that looks like. _____ in *The Book of Joy*, a book about conversations between the Dalai Lama and the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, tells about the logistics of getting them together. The Archbishop was coming to India, but the airport at Dharamsala, where the Dalai Lama was, is only open a couple hours a day. Also the Archbishop was weak from treatment for cancer, so they stopped off in Amritsar overnight to rest. Well, what do you do if you're in Amritsar? If you're the Christian archbishop on your way to meet with a great Buddhist teacher, even if you're tired from chemo, you visit the most sacred site of the Sikh religion, the Golden Temple. It has four doors, one on each side of the gurudwara, symbolizing its openness to all people and all religions. You cover your head in a gurudwara, so Bishop Tutu had an orange scarf on his head, which, the narrator says, made him look like a day-glo pirate.

The proclamation of the kingdom is encountering people where they are, if they are open to it. It's offering what you have to offer, and accepting what they offer. It's establishing a connection and calling attention to the presence of the kingdom of God. Jesus is realistic about the possibility of rejection, but it really doesn't matter, because the kingdom of God *is* at hand, and made evident as we come together.

The disciples returned to Jesus with joy because they'd successfully carried out exorcisms, which has to be pretty exhilarating. And Jesus affirmed them, saying that he'd seen Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. But what they should really be happy about, he said, was not their success, but that "their names were written in heaven," e.g., that they were part of the kingdom they'd proclaimed. In going out and establishing connections, they had enacted the kingdom and lived its reality. Even if doing so made them look like Day-Glo pirates, even if they'd eaten strange food, maybe *especially* if they'd done those things—the kingdom was more powerfully among them.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, your kingdom has come near to us. You have named us and claimed us, and you make us new. We pray that we would see the eyes of Christ in the faces of others, and grow in our disposition to reach out in peace and trust to others, as the disciples did in every town and place. Amen.