

July 7, 2019

Birthday Musings

Shepherd's Grace Church

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. ²He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. ³Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' ⁶And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' ¹⁰But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ¹¹'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.' ¹⁶"Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

¹⁷The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" ¹⁸He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. ¹⁹See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. ²⁰Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20)

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. ²Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. ⁴All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. ⁵For all must carry their own loads. ⁶Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher. ⁷Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. ⁸If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. ⁹So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. ¹⁰So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

¹¹See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! ¹²It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. ¹⁴May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! ¹⁶As for

those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. ¹⁷From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.(Gal. 6: 1-17)

When I get older losing my hair
Many years from now
Will you still be sending me a Valentine
Birthday greetings bottle of wine

If I'd been out till quarter to three
Would you lock the door
Will you still need me, will you still feed me
When I'm sixty-four

You'll be older too
And if you say the word
I could stay with you

I could be handy, mending a fuse
When your lights have gone
You can knit a sweater by the fireside
Sunday mornings go for a ride
Doing the garden, digging the weeds
Who could ask for more

Will you still need me, will you still feed me
When I'm sixty-four

Every summer we can rent a cottage
In the Isle of Wight, if it's not too dear
We shall scrimp and save
Grandchildren on your knee
Vera, Chuck and Dave

Send me a postcard, drop me a line
Stating point of view
Indicate precisely what you mean to say
Yours sincerely, wasting away

Give me your answer, fill in a form
Mine for evermore
Will you still need me, will you still feed me
When I'm sixty-four (McCartney/Lennon)

When I get older, losing my hair, not so long from now...will you still need me, will you still feed me when I'm 64? Jack M. Dickson born July 4, 1966—that makes me how old? That's what I thought. I'm 64. So I ask the question. It is easy to ask the congregation. Will you still need me? Will you still feed me?

You know me. You invite me into your homes and into your lives and I invite you into mine. What about others? Am I too old for them? Am I a has been? Will they still need me? Will they still place their trust in me? Will they still need us? How can we know.

Here is the more scary question for me...what about the Lord? Can he still use someone as old as me? Will He still need me? Will He still provide for me so I can still be a

witness for Him? Things like this often come to my mind as birthday musings. They don't always come as powerfully as they did last week!

So, as I was making notes last week for this sermon, I could not have imagined how the Lord would have directed me. I imagined telling stories of gathering with my mom and Rochelle's family to celebrate in traditional ways. You know the ways. The ways I hope many of you got to celebrate...with food and fun and fireworks.

Being a 4th of July baby, this is the way I have celebrated many of my birthdays and as I genuinely told people who asked in the days leading up to my birthday, I always assumed that the holiday was just for me. It was after all, my birthday. The fact that the nation was fortunate enough to have started on the same day was just a happy coincidence for everyone else.

I mean, it was fortunate for all of you because it meant that you got an extra day off...It meant that you had a chance to celebrate with your families in the middle of the summer. It meant that you could enjoy all the treats of summer...hot dogs, apple pie, homemade ice cream and lots of noise thrown in for good measure! What a bonus! But for me, it was probably what I was going to do anyway...because it was my birthday.

Little did I know as I started making those notes that the week of my birthday would turn out for me as it did. Little did I know and little could I have imagined! Monday and Tuesday were pretty much work a day days for me but Wednesday was where my week started heading in a different direction.

I woke up Wednesday morning urging Rochelle to get the pre and post operation instructions for the procedure she was supposed to have on Friday. When we checked the mail, those were not there and I had to go to the hospital to get them.

Have you ever tried going to a hospital at 4PM on the day before a holiday to get information you needed from a particular department? My advice...Don't! Everyone is gone. Everyone who is not gone is trying to be gone. Everyone who can't be gone doesn't know anything about anything. About Anything!

At any rate, I spent considerable time trying unsuccessfully to secure the documents I was seeking. I came home empty handed and with the beginnings of a headache. The headache soon turned to a toothache and I realized I was in serious trouble. It was after all, approaching 5PM on the day before a holiday and I was in agonizing pain from a tooth that had broken and I was trying to nurse until after the holiday.

Fortune did not favor me. The tooth was throbbing more and more and I was certain I would not be able to get help relieving the pain...but, I made the phone call.

I have to tell you here that the dentist was not my usual dentist. If I could have, I would have called Jess Plumber...yes I had a plumber for a dentist! Jess, however had retired. He was not available and I had not been to the dentist since the new dentist took over.

The new dentist was Dr. Nolan Andrews and quite surprisingly, he and his staff were still at work at 4:30 on Wednesday afternoon. I explained my situation to the receptionist and she spoke with the dental assistant and the doctor. Amazed and astounded, I listened to the other end of the phone conversation as the crew at R Squared dentistry agreed that they would see me!

Before they had a chance to change their minds, I made my way to El Dorado and was greeted by friendly people, eager to help! They sat me down and looked in my mouth and I am sure I heard them laugh! I was hoping that they could save the fractured tooth but they shook their heads and said no! Not just no, but not a chance! The tooth had to come out and it had to come out now!

Clinching my fists together out of full fledged fear, I agreed and prepared myself for the extraction. They meanwhile took a closer look at the tooth. They determined that not only was an extraction necessary but a bone graft would be required as well. They explained the procedure to me and advised me that it would be considerably more painful when the numbing medication wore off. Not exactly what I wanted to hear...but what choice did I have?

I was finally and mercifully finished at the dentist at about 7PM. In that time period, someone from the staff had reviewed my records to discover that I was indeed a 4th of July Baby. They all gathered around as the dentist put in the last suture and smilingly wished me a very happy birthday...that is, all but Doctor Andrews. He just shook his head and said, "Now, you will probably be in some pain tomorrow. Likely you won't feel anything tonight but tomorrow might be rough. I have called in a prescription for antibiotics but you will have to take this prescription for pain medication there yourself.

It was 7PM on Wednesday evening and by the time I got to the pharmacy, they were closed. I was left to only over the counter meds to get me through the evening...through the third of July.

Did I mention I was supposed to meet Rochelle and family for dinner after the dentist...no, I probably left that part out. Anyway, Rochelle had a long lost cousin that was coming to town to "catch up." We had grilled chicken breast and other great tasting foods...usually great tasting anyway. I tasted nothing!

After dinner, the pain meds were starting to wear off and I excused myself to come home early. When I arrived home, I took as much Tylenol as I could safely take and headed to bed.

I'm sure I told you this was the third of July. The third of July in our town is a lot like the 4th of July. It is loud and light and it is right outside our window. Every artillery shell, every roman candle, every fountain seemed to rattle the windows and the now vacated spot where my tooth used to reside! From 10 PM to midnight, the noise continued and was constant! I felt as well as heard every sound! The pain was intense and sleep did not come until about 3:30 in the morning.

Finally, mercifully I fell asleep for about 2 hours and when I woke, the pain had subsided. I got up to go for a run, a habit on most weeks but a tradition on my

birthday. As I was getting dressed, Rochelle woke up and said No! No, you are not going out this morning. I politely listened but left to go anyway.

Oliver and I got about a mile into our run and it started pouring rain! We turned around and were completely soaked when we got back to the house. I guess the Lord and Rochelle both were against the idea of my 4th of July tradition.

Soon after I got back, my tooth started throbbing again.

My plan for my birthday was slowly slipping away. My run was gone, the pain was intense and even after I got my pain medicine, the tooth pain did not subside. I was miserable. Both my daughters called fairly early in the morning but I could only talk to each of them a couple of minutes because the only thing that seemed to help the pain was ice cold water in my mouth. Have you ever tried talking with water in your mouth?

Even the video of James, my grandson, wishing me a happy birthday was difficult to watch.

There were plans for the late afternoon. Hot dogs to eat and homemade ice cream! There was the big fireworks display later in the day and the climax to that show with lots of light and noise. We had a great place to watch right by the lake but I was not there. I was at home in bed listening and hurting and feeling every explosion as if it were happening right in my mouth.

My imagined celebration with friends and family failed to take place in any way I imagined. My imagined celebration was not the reality of this year, of this birthday, of this moment and as I paused to reflect on the musings of my birthday, I realized they tied to the message from Paul to the Galatians and from the Gospel of Luke that were shared with us this morning.

We must all bear our own burdens, Paul says. We must all carry our own stuff. Rochelle had been given the instructions for pre and post op over the phone and by the doctor. She had written it all down and even though the doctor's office promised to send the instructions and failed, she still had the information. Just because the information was not delivered as promised, it was still delivered. She bore the burden of following those instructions and she was perfectly able to accomplish all that needed to be accomplished to see that those instructions were followed.

My need to have the information in writing was an attempt to carry a part of the load for her procedure that was not my load to carry. The instructions were not my responsibility. My responsibility was to be supportive, to be present and to be available for the unexpected. As Paul says, we must all carry the load for one another.

What the difference is between a burden and a load is subtle. What I came to understand in my birthday musings is that we are not responsible for the lives of others but we are responsible to be present for one another, to be fully present and to be available as needed. The need is not one that is determined by us but by the other. When the other makes us aware of the need, we can and should be there to respond.

Paul makes it clear that it doesn't matter how we are marked. We can all be marked with a sign of circumcision or we can be absent this mark. We are still called to serve one another by listening, by learning, by being present in the moment we are needed.

The dentist has a tremendous amount of education and skill. Still, if the dentist had determined that he needed to begin the holiday weekend on time as he planned, my pain would have continued unabated. I did not have the skill needed to solve my own problem so I needed the help of another. That other was present and made himself and his whole team available.

I did not have the mark of a dentist. That did not matter to the one who was called to help. He set aside the trappings of his position and allowed himself to carry the load of my pain, easing it according to the gift he was given.

We cannot always tell what marks others have. We cannot always know what their gifts are. We can only realize that when we put ourselves in a position to share carry our load and come along side others there are times that others can help bear our burdens and even lighten our load as appropriate.

Those others might look different from us. They might be of greater or lesser education. They might be of greater or lesser economic status. They might be of a different skin color. They might be of a different gender. We do not know the other who will come along side us. We only know that for that moment, we are in the world together and God has placed us in the same place for a reason. We cannot know but we can be available.

The 70 that Jesus chose and appointed in the lesson from Luke were available. They were available even after all these things. We do not know what all these things are but we can imagine they were different for each and every one of them. Perhaps they were toothaches or surgeries or emergency procedures. We do not know. We only know they were available.

These 70 represent all of us. They are the 70 nations that were scattered at the tower of Babel. They were and are all the nations of the world. And they were sent to all the places Jesus intended to go, representing the God of all nations. In Matthew and in Mark, Jesus instructs the 12 to go only to the people of Israel, but in Luke there is no such instruction. The 70 are sent to all so all may have a choice. We represent the 70 and we represent the all. We are part of the kingdom of God! That kingdom is near and we are a part of it.

We are a part of it together. When I was in pain, the dentist was a part of the kingdom that came near. He and his team worked together to ease my pain and lighten my load. They offered me peace and they offered it as partners with me.

Jesus sent the 70 out in pairs. He did this because he knew the work of sharing the kingdom was too difficult for any one to take on by themselves. The work of kingdom building is a work of helping and carrying the load of others and of being present. It is the work we at Shepherd's Grace take seriously. It is the work that is part of our second rule of ministry.

We never do ministry alone. We always work together. We come together to share the struggle, to share the heartache, and also to share the joy. When Jesus sent the 70, he reminded them that they had nothing but themselves, nothing but each other to lean on, to rely on for the success of their mission. They were to take no bag, or purse or sandals and they were to greet no one else on the road. They were to work together relying only on each other for the success of their mission.

Just like the dentist who came into my life this week, they were to work as a team. When the dentist was working, the assistant was right there at his side, giving aid and offering advice. The two functioned as one so their mission could be accomplished. They were working for completion of their agreed upon goal. They were not constrained by time or space or resource. They used all their knowledge and skill but they used it together. They each bore their own burden but together they carried the load of the work. As they worked they offered something beyond what each of them had. They offered support for each other and they offered the different gifts of their training and insight.

That is what Jesus is inviting us to do today as part of the 70. He is inviting us to work together to accomplish the announcement of the kingdom of God. Do we bring the kingdom...well, in a way we do. We are the kingdom, we are the workers in the harvest but there is more.

Our mission is not to complete the harvest but to announce that the harvest is ready, the harvest is near. Here in Kansas, we know how this works. Men walk into the fields. They look at the grain in the head of the plant. They talk to one another and they announce that the harvest is ready. Only then do the cutters come in to do the work of gathering and completing the harvest. The process is one where many work together to accomplish a common goal.

To accomplish a common goal there must be an expectation that the goal can be attained. There must be an agreement. When Jesus said "first say, peace be to this house," he was identifying what the agreement must be. The agreement must be on a desire for peace...not just for peace, but for the fuller meaning of peace, for Shalom.

Shalom is the peace that passes all understanding. It is the realization that there is nothing missing and nothing broken. It is the acceptance of all people in the process of bringing about the coming of the kingdom. It is the recognition that even those who are not fully prepared still bring gifts that can be used.

When I was at the hospital seeking instructions, those who were there did everything they could to help. They offered their time, their knowledge and their encouragement that the doctors would be fully prepared. They assured me that what had been given to Rochelle would be sufficient. Even though they were not the most expert, they conveyed a confidence in those who were that indeed, nothing was missing and nothing was broken. It was up to me to accept what they were offering.

They were offering peace. The pairs that went into the various towns and places Jesus was going were offering peace. The ones who were in the various places had to decide to receive and believe in that peace. I had to decide, to accept that peace. I had to

believe that even though I did not have all the information, those who needed information had what they needed and if I chose, I could believe in and trust what they had. I could accept their offer of shalom, of peace or I could choose to reject it.

Jesus said, if your peace, your assurance, your commitment to the coming of the Kingdom was received by others who were interested in something more than what they had...if your peace was received as a genuine offer to walk together and work together, then that offer would remain and would be taken up by others.

That is the fundamental of disciple making. That is the beginning of faith. That is the trust Jesus is asking us to display this morning. We are part of the 70 who make the offer of peace but we are also part of the world waiting to decide. Will we become part of the kingdom? Will we commit to the understanding that no one of us can do all things? Will we agree to the concept that we must work together to accomplish the Love God wants us to know for each other?

Do we really expect that others can be as committed to bringing about peace as we are? These others look so different from us. They sound different. They act different. They are not the same so how can they want the same.

Jesus said, if they receive your peace it will remain with them. He was reminding us that the process of making the kingdom begins in small ways. It begins by understanding that our imagination of the ways our life will go are not always the realities of the way our lives will go.

Sometimes we find ourselves caught up in the reality of the coming of the kingdom. Sometimes we find ourselves caught up by the possibility that we can witness what happens when people truly come together to accomplish something special.

I was privileged this week to watch Satan fall from the sky like lightning. I was privileged to witness the casting out of pain and the curing of illness. I was privileged to witness the kingdom of heaven as it came near.

I was not the author of what I witnessed as I might have intended but I was instead the recipient of the invitation. Peace was offered in the form of people coming to my aid in moments of great struggle. Peace was offered as others came together to carry the burden of my pain and to ease the anxiety of my struggle.

I imagine that each of us can find a place this past week where that peace was offered to us. My experience is not unique, but it does point to the uniqueness of God's work in our world. If we are open, we can walk through the snakes and scorpions of our lives and not be harmed. We can find others who are willing to provide for us and protect us until we are strong enough to protect ourselves.

But this is not why we rejoice today. No! We rejoice because we can say yes to God! We can be among the 70 that go out. We can be among the ones who are in the house when peace is offered. We can be part of the 70 after that and the 70 after that and we can continue to witness because Jesus has given us the authority to do that. The reason for our rejoicing is in the promise that our God make to us.

We can rejoice today because today, we see the Lord still needing us, still calling us, still sending us...even when we are 64. Today we rejoice because God knows our names and is counting on us to continue to bring the Kingdom of God close to those whom we meet as we move from place to place!

I will never leave you or forsake you or abandon you. I have chosen you and you are mine! We rejoice today because we are known by God and our names are whispered in the kingdom of heaven. A kingdom you should know has come near. Amen!