

Today's gospel reading, is interesting on several levels. One observation is the rather awkward beginning of the reading. The Sunday lectionary gives us the story out of context. The reading begins, "After this, the Lord appointed seventy others..." and sent them ahead. "After this?" After what? "Seventy others?" Who were the first? What we must understand, because in the context of our reading we are not told, is that the story which we've read today is Luke's account of the second of two missionary journeys made by followers of Jesus. The second journey, the topic of the gospel reading today, was the larger effort. Our Lord's closest disciples, "The Twelve," made the first journey and their success encouraged Jesus to launch a bigger campaign. There are some interesting things about the numbers, as Luke reported them, also. Lots of times in the Bible, numbers carry secret symbolic meaning. Did Luke, author of this gospel, who happened to be a gentile, have a hidden message? Scholars have long associated our Lord's inner twelve disciples as symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel. In Luke's account, today, the Lord sends out seventy missionaries. The text of the gospel strongly suggests that the travels were confined to Jewish areas. There is nothing to suggest any travel to gentile areas, except this strange number, "seventy." The Jews of antiquity thought of the gentiles as consisting of seventy "nations." Some scholars have wondered if this suggests a hidden endorsement for including non-Jews in the kingdom of God, something we take for granted, but something that did not happen during our Lord's lifetime. The inclusion of gentiles came from the efforts of Saint Paul. The bottom line is that seventy disciples went out in pairs and returned to report great success. Clearly, God was with them as they went about the task of proclaiming the good news that Jesus is Lord.

But in spite of the success, we expect that there also was failure. In his enthusiasm, Luke doesn't report failure, but he includes the Lord's instructions about how to respond to those who will not hear the Gospel. Clearly Jesus anticipated that there would be rejection along with acceptance, and this is always the case. But I want to make a point of what Jesus said about rejection. What he said was, "Don't let it get to you. It is not your problem!" The Lord's bottom line on this was that God will tend to those who reject his message, in whatever manner is appropriate. To borrow an analogy from the Bible, it's the vineyard owner's problem, not the worker's. You and I and the seventy that Jesus sent out are the workers, not the property owner. We are labor, not management.

While this story is just a little bit of history about the earthly ministry of Jesus, I think that we can draw some observations that tell us a bit about this work of being disciples of Jesus Christ. I think that it speaks as much to us corporately, as a worshipping body of Christ, as it speaks to us individually. We believe that in seeking Christ, we have come to know a Christ of love, forgiveness and compassion. As thinking people, we believe that because God is the Creator and is ultimate truth, science, logic and reason can only

lead us closer to him; therefore Christians are expected to think, question and reason. We are not asked to accept anything blindly. We believe that God reveals himself in Scripture, but also in our daily experiences through the actions of the Holy Spirit, and we believe that our knowledge of God's revelation is ongoing and is always incomplete. There is always more for us to discover about God. We believe that in Christ, God has revealed himself as a God of grace, and prompts us to seek justice and be righteous. Even so, God does not compel our behavior, because he has given us freewill. In short, love and hope, not guilt and fear, drive our religious understanding.

Therefore, we proclaim the Gospel that we've lived. We preach Jesus as we have experienced him. The Lord's message to us is a message of love, forgiveness and compassion. We proclaim this and that is all that we can do. As Luke tells us in the Gospel passage today, our job is to pass on what Jesus has given us and not fret about those that will not listen. We have a lot of work to do. *Amen.*