

“The Seventy”

Luke 10:1–12; Acts 2:42–47; 1 Thessalonians 1:8

Seventy? The movement grows.

Twelve disciples? Is that all . . . No. Here we have a group of seventy whom Jesus sends out in pairs to carry the Good News to all the places he intended to go. (Like advance teams?!) Through these seventy disciples, we get a picture of God’s large work in this world, even in the middle of Luke’s story, long before the Great Commission.



This is best understood as the latest continuation of a project that God began long before, to reconcile humanity to himself and restore his creation. This work has progressed like ripples in a pond. The ripples began with Abraham and moved outward to his family and descendants, becoming the people known as Israel. And then among Israel, a stone fell into the pond unlike any before or since. From this stone, this foundation stone, the ripples continued to flow ever outward.

The Scripture passages for this week reflect this progression. Jesus first sends out the twelve and then the seventy. Jesus then commissions his disciples to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28) and to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1). Then the Holy Spirit arrives at Pentecost to form the believers into a church and empower them for their work. They settle into their new life in Jerusalem and new believers are added daily. The ripples keep coming. The Spirit sends apostles outward to spread yet more ripples and soon whole communities of believers spring up around the Mediterranean. The community in Thessalonica was one such portion of this movement. And their example causes even more ripples to spread (1 Thess. 1:9 above). And so it has been for two millennia. The mission of the UMC is in keeping with these ripples: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

It is the Church to whom God has entrusted this mission. We talk about the Church, a.k.a., the body of Christ, the church universal, the community of believers, the holy catholic (an old word meaning “universal”) church, the people of God, and so on. Yet, few topics in our faith are less well-understood or embraced than our proclamation that we are the Church. It is so tempting to see the Church, including our corner of it called Newport First UMC, as a club or as a gathering of the like-minded. But that is not the truth. So, let’s go over the basics.

First, all those who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus have been given new life and make up his Church. We are new creations. We have been born anew. We have died with Christ and been raised with Christ.

Second, God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, has formed all the believers into a single, unified body: the Church. It is the Spirit who has called us to God. It is the Spirit who has formed us into the body of Christ.

Third, you can think of each local church, like First UMC, as a colony of God’s Church, an outpost of this reborn human race.

Fourth, as colonists, we have been given work to do by our sovereign Master. We have been made a part of our Creator’s mission. We are here for a reason. We have not been saved merely for our own sakes, but for the sake of the whole world. We are to make disciples, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

Fifth, God does not leave us to pursue this work on our own. It is the Holy Spirit who opens the pages of Scripture to us, who pulls our hearts toward God and others, and who empowers us to build for God’s kingdom.

So . . . given these five points of classic Christian orthodoxy, the full dimensions of what it means to the body of Christ become clearer. If we are Jesus' body, who are his arms? If we are Jesus' body, who are his feet? If we are Jesus' body, who is his back?

It is we, the Church, of course. You and me and all those who confess that Jesus is Lord. We are the arms of Jesus that hold the hurting. We are the feet of Jesus that deliver the Good News. We are Jesus' back, lifting up the poor and the oppressed. It takes strong arms, swift feet, and a sturdy back. By grace, God strengthens us for this work. And in this work there is profound joy, peace, and contentment.

Our two-fold mission

We have to guard against our tendency to chop up our concept of mission. If we concern ourselves only with disciple-making and neglect those who lack even the basics of life, then how are we truly emulating Christ? But if we provide food and clothing, yet do not tell the person of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ, we are ignoring what matters most. We are to proclaim and to feed. We are to teach and to clothe. Both, together, constitute living the mission. As we go from Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, we go with a Bible in one hand and a hammer in the other.

We also have to make sure we don't see "mission" or "missions" as the work of a special department or agency or institution. God has pulled the Church into the accomplishment of his mission and none of us are left out. In his commentary on Luke, Alan Culpepper very helpfully sets out ten principles of mission embedded in the Luke 10:1-12 passage.¹

First, it affirms the world's need for the church's mission: "The harvest is plentiful." There is more work to do than laborers to do it.

Second, Jesus' commission affirms the importance of prayer in support of the church's mission: "Ask the lord of the harvest."

Third, it insists on the active participation of each disciple: "Go on your way." The work of the church is not merely the calling of a select few. . . .

Fourth, Jesus' commission warns of the dangers believers will face and provides guidelines: "I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves." . . .

Fifth, Jesus calls for singularity of purpose: "Greet no one on the road."

Sixth, the commission specifies the purpose of the mission: "Say, 'Peace to this house' and 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" Disciples declare what God is doing and bring God's peace to whomever receives them. Share table fellowship with whomever receives you.

Seventh, the host, not the guest, sets the context for the disciple's witness: "Eat what is set before you." The disciples do not seek to dictate the menu or impose their own cultural background on others.

Eighth, Jesus' commission recognizes that the disciples will not always succeed: "[When] they do not welcome you...." Jesus knew that the disciples would meet resistance and rejection some of the time.

Ninth, Jesus admonished the disciples to persevere: Shake their dust from your feet.

Tenth, and finally, Jesus gives the disciples a word of assurance about the fulfillment of God's redemptive mission: "Know this: the kingdom of God has come near." . . .

A final word on the Church

It is easy to see the Church as merely as an instrument used by God to accomplish his purposes. But this would be a tragic mistake. We are made for the worship of God, revealed in Jesus Christ. As Simon Chan writes, "God made the world in order to make the church." The church does not consist of buildings, not even the beautiful

¹ Culpepper, R. A. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Luke. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 9, p. 222). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

sanctuaries such as our own. Rather, the church consists of all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. God had once dwelt in the temple of Jerusalem, but, beginning at Pentecost, God dwells in and among his people. It is the people of God themselves who are joined together in Christ, a new creation and new humanity, growing into a holy temple, the temple to which God has returned. What a remarkable claim we make, that God's very presence dwells in us, the church -- the people of God.

For more than fifty years, there has been a congregation called Newport First UMC in the holy, catholic church. We have been on a journey, understanding that God created us to be his. For our part of the world, we are a large community and we have all the blessings and challenges that come with size, but we must never lose sight of the fact that we are not merely an organization. Rather, we, as the body of Christ, are the very presence of Christ.