

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

The story of the mission of the seventy is a second mission story. Jesus sends out the twelve earlier in the story and gives them instructions about what they are to do (Luke 9:1-6). The mission of the seventy is an extension of the mission of the twelve. One major difference is that this is a mission in Samaria. (See the commentary on Luke 9:51-62 for discussion on the relationship between Jews and Samaritans.) This is a peace mission among Samaritans who were often hostile to Jews in Galilee and Judea.

This story is a series of instructions by Jesus. The only exception is when the seventy return rejoicing and saying, "Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us." There is excitement in their report and in their sharing with Jesus. Prior to that everything is a series of commands about what they are to do and a description of what this means.

Jesus is here speaking as a commander but the mission that he is sending them on is radically different than a military mission. It is different than David or Saul sending young men on a particular military task. Jesus gives his disciples commands with a kind of implicit military spirit, but he is giving the orders for a nonviolent peace mission against the powers of evil, not for war against human enemies.

The contrast between this mission of the seventy and the expectations of the Messiah is a contrast between a mission of war and a mission of nonviolent resistance to the powers of evil by establishing peace between enemies. In the background of this story are the instructions to the twelve about what they are to do, namely to heal the sick and to preach the Kingdom of God. This mission is implied but not explicitly stated in this story.

What follows are some observations about the mnemonic structure of the story to make it easier for you to identify the ways of remembering it. Think of this as a sound map of the story:

Episode 1: The first episode is Jesus' command: "He sent them on ahead of them in pairs to every town where he intended to go and said, 'The harvest is plentiful.'" This first episode has the harvest metaphor, so remember the harvest and the command: "harvest is plentiful; laborers are few" and "ask the Lord of the harvest send out laborers." These are the verbal threads of the two sentences.

Episode 2: The second episode is Jesus' instruction: "Go on your way. Now look, I'm sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves." This is a memorable metaphor, so think lambs and wolves. Then the instructions: "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals and greet no one on the road." These instructions are somewhat surprising. Prior to this Jesus has sent them out but has never said, "Greet no one on the road." Furthermore, no purse, no bag and no sandals mean that they have absolutely nothing. They are sent out on a mission in total dependence on God and other people.

Episode 3: The third episode involves housing with a person who shares the mission of peace: "Whatever house you enter say, 'Peace to this house,' and see how they respond. If they share the peace mission, then remain in the same house; don't move from house to house." The structure of this episode is first peace, and the identification of someone who shares in peace. You would then eat and drink what they provide and not move around from house to house. What's in the background of this is that the disciples would be tempted to move around from house to house and get the best food in every place. It also gives them a way of discerning who will support their peacemaking mission.

Episode 4: The next episode is about the towns: the towns that welcome you and the towns that do not welcome. "In the towns that welcome you, eat what is set before you, cure the sick and say to them that the kingdom has come near. When they don't welcome you, shake off even the dust that clings to your feet."

Episode 5: The fifth episode is about those who listen and those who reject. The result is that the seventy returned exclaiming, "Even the demons submit to us!" Notice the verbal thread: a reference to demon submission concludes the story.

The last episode is Jesus' words about the domination of Satan: "I watched Satan fall from heaven and I've given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over all the power the enemy and nothing will hurt you." The last thing is about rejoicing: "Don't rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Hopefully these are helpful things to identify about the character of the story and of its mnemonic structure.

This story has the only notice of the seventy in addition to the twelve in the gospel tradition. The significance for Luke is that it is first twelve and now seventy. The mission is expanding and those whom Jesus is sending is increasing. The description of what they are to do is made explicit in what they are to do in the Samaritan towns where they are welcomed, "say to them the Kingdom of Heaven has come near" and then at the end when they report, "Even the demons submit to us."

But there is no word about casting out demons in Jesus' instructions. The initial instruction is to prepare his way. This is like the notice about John the Baptist in the beginning of Mark who "goes to prepare the way for you." Those who prepared the way for a king prepared the way for a royal procession. The disciples are to go and prepare Jesus' way up to Jerusalem in all the towns and cities by doing the things that he commands them. And they prepare his way by establishing peace between Samaritans and Jews.

Clearly, if they have done these things in towns and villages, then Jesus will receive a good welcome. He will also know which towns to enter and which ones to avoid. The mission on which he is sending his disciples is like sending out lambs. This means that it is dangerous and that they are highly vulnerable. They go with no weapons; they go with

no resources, no purse, no bag, and no sandals. In relation to Jesus' strategy, it means that they come to these towns with nothing, so they are not in any way a threat. They have no resources to be stolen, nor do they carry any threat of violence or hostility. There is wisdom in Jesus' words about the way in which he is sending them out.

Likewise, greeting no one is a protection against random violence on the road. They are on an urgent mission that can only be safely carried out in the towns where they meet people and get to know them.

Regarding the gift of peace: "Whenever you enter...say first 'peace to this house'." Why is that an issue? It is because Samaritans had an expectation that if Jews came into their village in two's or four's they might want to steal or commit violence in some way. Their mission is in contrast to war or pillage. They are to bring peace. The "peace to this house" is also a greeting of the presence of the kingdom of God. It is the first gift of the government that Jesus will establish, the gift of peace. And this peace is in the context of long-standing hostility. It is not only the absence of war, it is also shalom, the full sense of complete well-being. But Luke's context is the late 80's or early 90's when his gospel was composed in the immediate aftermath of the Jewish war. War was a major issue that was in the background for Luke's listeners.

This gift of peace can be rejected, as is the case with all offers of peace. Peace is described here as a spiritual power. Therefore, if someone, in this case a Samaritan, shares in peace then your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. The gift of peace and the offer of peace is in part a negotiation. It is to see whether or not the person who is offered this peace will give it back. If they reciprocate the offer of peace, a spiritual relationship of peace is established. It is also an indication that they share the disciples' mission of peace.

The injunction to stay in the same house is another pragmatic consideration to help the disciples keep from shopping around for the best place and trying out this house and that house to see which one has the best food. Jesus instructs them to stay in the same house and not to make that an issue because that would be a distraction in the town in relation to their mission. It would also imply that they were using the town for their own advantage.

The description about how to respond to the towns that do not welcome you is intended to enable the seventy to deal with their discouragement and to respond without violence or retribution. Rather than leaving the town dejected and discouraged if they are not welcomed, they are to leave the town making a prophetic announcement: "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you; but know that the Kingdom of God is come near and you have rejected it." This strategy of pronouncement of protest also stands in contrast to bringing down fire on them as James and John had suggested earlier.

The rejection then will not intimidate or discourage the disciples; it is their problem, not yours, so simply announce that. Then Jesus describes that it is not them who is being rejected: "Whoever listens to you, listens to me. Whoever rejects you, rejects me and whoever rejects me, rejects the one who sent me." So, disciples, be clear about what's

going on here. It is not about you. It is about pointing to a reality that I have introduced and that God has introduced. So if they reject you, they are not just rejecting you; they are rejecting me, and they are rejecting God who sent me on this mission of peace.

The joy of the seventy is that even the demons submit. They have experienced the dominance of the power of God over the powers of evil. Jesus' final words to them are a sharing of their joy: "Now I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning and I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy and nothing will hurt you."

The enemy here is not the Romans, nor the Gentiles, nor any foreign army. The enemy is rather the spiritual power of evil that brings about violence. That's what the disciples go to combat in the Samaritan villages: the ways in which the powers of evil have been present in these towns and communities fostering enmity and hostility. Their joy, then, is to be focused not on their great success, but rather on their recognition in the Book of Heaven. In other words, they are to be aware that they are part of the extension of God's government of peace in the world. That is to be their source of joy.

It is also the source of joy for everyone who would tell this story and for all those who will experience in hearing the story that they too are sent to be part of this mission of the establishment of the government of God in the world. Your audience is part of the seventy, too. Where can your congregation canvass and care in areas where there is historic hostility between groups of people? This story has a lot of energy and is a story about the broadening and extension of Jesus' mission and the mission of the kingdom of God.