

## WHAT IS THE MISSION?

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*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. He said to them, "See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves." (Luke 10:1, 3)*

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke has reminded me of a photograph that can truly be called iconic of American history. Yes, I know that "iconic" is an adjective that is too cheaply deployed these days, like standing ovations. They come too easily, and so does the word "iconic." But the famous photograph I have in mind can be called iconic because it really does allow us to peer deeply into a moment in time, almost as if we were there, and understand its complexity and significance. The photograph was taken on June 5, 1944. It was the eve of D-Day, the great invasion of Allied forces to liberate occupied France from the grip of Nazi Germany. The plan called for 13,000 paratroopers from the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> airborne divisions to be dropped at night behind enemy lines in advance of the massive forces that would land on the beaches in the morning. The mission of the paratroopers would be to block the inland routes to the various Allied landing sites, and thus prevent the Nazis from sending reinforcements once the invasion began.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, had been warned by British military advisors that certain landing sites were far too heavily defended, and that half the paratroopers would be dead before they hit the ground. Eisenhower agonized over the decision, knowing full well that he would be sending thousands of men as lambs into the midst of wolves. Nevertheless, he decided that the fate of the free world depended on such a sacrifice, and he gave the order for the mission to proceed.



Eisenhower wanted to spend time with the paratroopers before their planes took flight. On June 5<sup>th</sup> he left his command post and drove to Greenham Common Airfield, where the troops were being readied. When the soldiers saw Eisenhower and his staff approaching, they stopped and saluted. Then they crowded around the General to hear what he had to say. The photographers began snapping pictures. The most famous of the photos shows Eisenhower briefing the troops, who were already laden with gear on their backs and camouflage smeared on their faces. We see them pressing in close as if their Commander might impart some last words of advice and inspiration to help them succeed. Eisenhower looks appropriately intense as he gestures with his right arm. Here was the great General face-to-face with his troops, many of whom would give their lives for the freedom of others. It is truly an iconic photograph of an American moment that allows us to gaze deeply into the spirit of our country.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, we've heard how Jesus gathered around him seventy followers before sending them out on a dangerous mission. Their charge was to fan out in pairs to the neighboring towns – presumably 35 of them – and announce that the kingdom of God was near. God's campaign to reclaim his people had begun. The Messiah was here. Jesus himself would be coming soon after them, so it was time for the people to decide which side they were on: the occupying powers or the kingdom of God. Whenever Jesus talked about the

occupying powers, most people thought he meant the Romans and other Gentiles. Actually, he understood his foe to be all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. The personification of the evil powers was Satan, who corrupts and destroys the creatures of God. Jesus knew full well that he was sending the seventy into dangerous, even enemy-occupied territory. Those who had a vested interest in keeping the political, social, and religious establishments the way they were would deal harshly with anyone breathing the winds of change. So as the seventy pressed in close to hear the instructions of Jesus, he said, “*See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.*”

How did they do? Was the mission a success? Apparently, it was an overwhelming success. Luke reports that *the seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!”* Then Jesus said to them, “*I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*” It’s quite an attractive picture of life in Christ, isn’t it? Joy, authority, the enemy in retreat, and our names written in heaven.

Luke’s account of the mission of the seventy is obviously a central passage for understanding the mission of the church today. We might even call it an iconic passage. Our charge is to go forth into the world and do the same: to be a force for good, roll back the powers of evil, and announce the kingdom of God. But immediately we run into problems. Let’s state the most obvious problem first. We feel ill equipped to do the job. On D-Day the Allied paratroopers each carried, on average, one-hundred pounds of gear, weaponry, and supplies that would help them succeed. But when the seventy leaned in close to Jesus he said to carry no purse, no bag, and no sandals. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. And the budgets are tight, and the resources are scarce.

We don’t know how to do it. If today’s reading calls to mind the historic Eisenhower photo, it also reminds me of an old sketch by the English comedy group Monty Python called “How to do it.” “How to do it” was a parody of a talk show where guests would tell how to solve the major problems of the world. One guest explained how to rid the earth of all known diseases: *First, become a doctor and discover a marvelous cure for something. Then, when the medical world really starts to take notice of you, you can jolly well tell them what to do and make sure they get it right.* Another guest explained how to play the flute: *You blow in one end, and move your fingers up and down the outside.* Well, yes, all true. But we sense that curing diseases, playing the flute, and the mission of the church involve a good bit more than any cursory instructions might convey.

What is more, these days we aren’t even sure what the mission is. People understand the mission of other institutions. A hospital is to cure the sick, a school is to educate students, a factory is to make a product, a company is to make a profit for its shareholders. But what is the mission of the church? As a society we’ve lost the shared, public understanding of the church’s purpose. Is it to make believers out of unbelievers? Are we to go forth into the world persuading people that they really ought to repent of their old thoughts and ways and adopt our thoughts and ways? Some say that such religious wrangling does more to increase the rancor in the world rather than create peace on earth. They make a good point. So we live in a time of confusion and frustration and hesitation as disciples of Jesus. What are we supposed to be doing? What is the mission? Is it so high that we cannot attain to it?

This week I read an interesting article about the famous photograph of Eisenhower and the paratroopers. Historians long debated what exactly the great general was saying to the soldiers in the moment. Surely his words were lofty, profound, and inspiring. Surely he was speaking of the high ideals of America, and reminding the soldiers of the great and terrible moment in history they

were inhabiting. Years after the war someone was able to identify the soldier to whom Eisenhower was speaking most directly. His name was Wallace Strobel, and he survived not only D-Day, but the entire war. When Strobel was tracked down and asked what Eisenhower was saying, he replied, "The subject was fishing." Eisenhower had asked Strobel where he was from, and Strobel replied, "Michigan." "How's the fishing in Michigan?" asked Eisenhower. "It's great, sir," said the soldier. The general went on to talk about how he'd been fishing in Michigan, and even shared some of his techniques. Finally, Eisenhower asked Strobel if he'd been well briefed. Strobel said he was ready.

Likewise, if we lean in closer to today's Gospel passage we might hear more of what Jesus is saying. Frankly, we might even learn a thing or two about Jesus' fishing techniques. You see, the subject was fishing. The mission of the church is to fish for people. Why? Not to catch them and grill them. Not to defeat or destroy them. The mission of the church is to restore them. It is to restore all people to unity with God and each other through Christ. How to do it? Jesus said "*Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide.*" Pronounce peace and eat what is set before you. In other words, establish table fellowship. As disciples of Jesus we go forth into the world not to conquer an enemy, or defeat a foe, or correct a heretic, but to establish table fellowship with other children of God who may look and believe differently than we do. Jesus seems to be saying, "Take the time to get to know the people to whom you are sent." Listen. Don't argue about faith as doing so may only convey that you're interesting in scoring converts. Instead, establish table fellowship, and then perhaps you can say that the kingdom of God has come near. This is what the kingdom of God looks like: when people break bread together.

Secondly, Jesus instructed the seventy to cure the sick. In other words, serve them. Reach out to them in their need. As much as possible, share their hardships and sufferings. Provide for their physical needs if that is the case. Feed them when they are hungry. Bandage their wounds. Comfort them in their grief. Be their companions. Perhaps build them a house. I note that in today's Gospel passage Jesus mentions the word "house" five times. I'll take that as my cue to plug our Habitat build day on Saturday, July 16, when we break ground on what we're calling "The House that Grace Built." We'll do so in partnership not only with Habitat for Humanity, but with the family that will live in the house, and the neighbors next door. As we break bread together, hammer nails, put up dry wall, and most especially when the family takes ownership of a new home, then we'll be able to say that the kingdom of God has come near. This is what the kingdom of God looks like.

Desmond Tutu, the retired Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, has described the mission of the church like this: "*Some of the most eloquent witnesses to the Christian gospel are those who are side by side with people in need, incarnating God's concern and love. If they do that with integrity people may ask, 'What makes you want to do this?' And then you have the opportunity to say, 'I am here really because I love Jesus, and Jesus has impelled me to come here, and I hope that my touch will be to some extent his touch.'*"

Jesus said, "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*" By the grace of God, you and I will respond, "Here we are, Lord. Send us."

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Information about the Eisenhower photo is based on "On D-Day minus one: the subject was fishing." Frederick Rasmussen, *The Baltimore Sun*, September 5, 1999.