

July 4, 2010

Speaking of Jesus

Off you go... the 70 of you. Yes, just like Moses years ago chose 70 to help him do his work. Go where I send you. Travel light. Don't stop to chitchat; your mission is urgent. Stay where you are welcomed but don't alter your message to please your hosts. Go in pairs so the truthfulness of your words will have 2 witnesses. And this is the **script**: you are to say, "*Peace to this house*" and "*the kingdom of God has come near.*"

So Jesus sent out the *seventy*. The mission of Christians since is much the same, except that we do it **speaking of Jesus**. Our mission, just like that of the 70, is to go ahead of Jesus announcing his coming. Our message is likewise scripture. Our script says, "*Jesus is the peace for this house.*" And, "*Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near to you.*" We are likewise sent out by Jesus, doing his work and announcing him, with a script for what we do and say.

Speaking of Jesus... how do we do that? How do we talk about Jesus with openness and integrity? Well, we have a script to follow. **Worship is such a script**. Worship is scripted to proclaim Jesus as our peace and hope, the risen Christ as God's promise to be at work in our lives. Anne Lamont, author of Traveling Mercies, tells how the message came through to her in worship. Raised in a good family of people who served others, teenage Anne slipped into dependency on drugs and alcohol and didn't know how to ask for help. She was drawn to the church. She writes:

One Sunday, "I was so hung over that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I thought was so ridiculous... but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to the feeling -- it washed over me."

In worship, the script and its spirit washed over her, speaking of Jesus, and she was changed, healed. Saved.

In Christian education, we also carry out the mission of *speaking of Jesus*, rehearsing the script of stories about God even though children may find the latest video game more entertaining and adults prefer the Sunday newspaper. But Grace Thomas, half a century ago in Georgia, learned the script. In 1954, she entered the race for governor, running against 8 men. There was one issue that year -- segregation. Of the candidates, only Grace thought the court case (of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*) that declared "separate but equal" schools unconstitutional to be just and good. She came in last at the polls. In 1962, she ran again with racial harmony still hotly contested. Campaigning in a small town, standing in the town square that once had been a slave market, she would say to a hostile crowd: "The old has passed away, and the new has come. This place represents a past over which we must repent. A new day is here when white

and black Georgians can join hands to work together.” When a heckler asked, “Where’d you get those gall-durned ideas?” she pointed to the steeple of a nearby church. “I got them over there in Sunday school.” She had learned the script. [Tom Long, *Testimony*, p. 135]

We have been sent out on a mission with a script and faith that are to be embodied in how we act and live. “Why did those Amish forgive that man who massacred their schoolchildren?” people asked. The secular press was astounded with articles asking, “How could they do that?” Their answer, simply: **“Because we are Christians, followers of Jesus.”** Right on script.

“Why are you here?” was on the face of the young man in New Orleans as we unloaded tools to repair a flooded house, “what is the real reason you are here?” “Why are you stopping?” is in the eyes of the young woman stranded with her car at the side of the road. “What’s the catch?” “I know why you will help me,” says the confident expression from the woman with the electricity shut-off notice in her hand. **“Because of Jesus,”** we say, according to the Gospel script.

Why do you people here, any of you, care about the poor you don’t even know... why turn the cheek to insult... why go the second mile when you are put upon? **Because: we are following Jesus, who is our peace.** “Why are you so hopeful, why do you have so little fear when there is so much to fear?” **Because: with Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near.** The Jesus script.

We have been sent out. When we conclude worship today, we will be sent out again, 70 here, another 70 back there, to give witness to the One who is coming... to embody the faith... speaking of Jesus, following the script given us.

Tom Long [in *Whispering the Lyrics*] tells of his high school senior class play. They worked hard on that play. The young woman director poured herself into it. After school she coached all the actors on lines and timing. After a fast food supper, she would dash back for evening rehearsals. Then she would stay up late working on props and painting -- totally unselfish commitment. When the curtains opened, the house was packed, and the cast was ready. The first act went like a dream; the comedy was working and everyone was enjoying the show. But in the second act, one actor forgot his lines; you could see that he couldn’t find the words. The young teacher director leaned toward the stage, encouraging him. Then as she was about to whisper his line out to him, he suddenly spoke. It was not the line in the script. In his anxiety, he just made something up. And it happened to be funny; the audience roared with laughter. Everybody on stage relaxed. Unfortunately, the forgetful actor heard the laughter and liked it, so he made up another line. This was also funny, sort of. The audience chuckled. So he made up another line, and another, and still another. The actors couldn’t respond with dialogue. He was out of control, spinning off whatever came into his head. The play was disintegrating, lost. The audience had figured that out by now and their laughter was nervous. Somehow, they finished the play. But what lingered in memory was the young director who had invested so much of herself in this play, standing in the wings, watching and crying...

We also have been given a script to follow -- a script we are not to change, making up our own lines. We have been sent out by Jesus on a mission with a script for how to act, what to say, how to live -- a script from *the One who has poured his life into it*, and into us.

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