

“Lambs vs Lions” – Luke 10:1-11,16-20

I was digging through some old disk files recently looking for copies of papers I had written for my previous DMin efforts, and finally found them. One of the papers was on leadership, and it reminded me of the leadership problem that Jesus experienced in our Gospel reading for today. One of the useful understandings I learned in management in my former life in the mining industry was the three-fold concept of delegating authority. This concept simplifies that concept into three fundamental practices that reflect increasing trust in the subordinate. Those three practices, or levels, can be expressed as:

1. I will tell you what to do.
2. Ask me before you do something.
3. Tell me what you have done.

This is a scheme that effectively works out the issues of balancing the boss’ need for control against trust in and development of subordinates. Understandably, the boss will get a bit annoyed if a subordinate fails to respond appropriately. If the subordinate acts at a ‘lower’ level of authority than granted, then they are seen as being unassertive, and not good leadership material. On the other hand, taking on too much authority is seen as the mark of a “go-getter”, unless of course it is too much, too often. It is important that the subordinate understands clearly the amount of authority given, and the amount of assumed authority that is acceptable.

The episode of Jesus sending out the seventy in twos is a classic example of working out the level of authority granted to subordinates. In the briefest of terms this incident describes the seventy being commissioned and sent out by Jesus with clear instructions on what to do, and their excited return describing how they had way exceeded those instructions, and Jesus’ reaction to them doing so. However, there is a great deal more happening here as well, and so we need to understand the story in much more detail.

To begin, we need to acknowledge that there are some difficult and troubling details in this story. The first is the need to recognize that the two parts of the story, the sending out and the return, have been put together. It doesn’t sound like much of an issue until you recognize what this means in terms of understanding Luke’s gospel, and indeed Luke himself. For anyone who insists that the gospels present an accurate ‘history’ of the events of which they speak, that means that there is a huge time gap here between verse 16 and verse 17. Seventy followers, in pairs, visiting all the towns that Jesus intended to visit, would be gone for more than a day. More than a week, even. Probably more than a month, given the instruction that they were to stay in each town for a significant length of time. But in the blink of an eye “they returned, rejoicing”.

Addressing this very question, and speeding up this process by a significant factor may lie behind Luke’s description of seventy being sent out, where other gospel writers refer to the sending out of the Twelve. Even the number seventy is in question, as the early texts are almost evenly split on using the number seventy-two. Given Luke’s fondness for telling his story with echoes and allusions from the Old Testament, we may fairly safely assume that Moses’ choice of twelve to represent the twelve tribes (Num 1:4-16) and then his choice of seventy (Num 11:16-25) lay in the background of Luke’s mind. Perhaps he was influenced also by recalling the seventy nations reported in Genesis 10, which become seventy-two in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was common in Luke’s day, a translation said to have been made by seventy translators who labored seventy days to give Gentiles the Old Testament in their own language.

A second troubling issue is the somewhat overzealous move to harsh, even spiteful and vindictive language against some of the towns and cities in the area. We have followed the Lectionary in skipping over the strongest of these attacks, but even in what we read we heard some fairly strong

condemnations of those who would not respond. These harsh words stand in strong contrast both to the instruction to declare “Peace to this house!” and the joy displayed by the returning seventy.

But the biggest issue of all in this episode is how the seventy failed to follow their instructions. Well, maybe they did follow their instructions, but it’s clear that they went far beyond what they were told to do, that they way exceeded their defined authorities. Those instructions were pretty clear: declare peace, stay in one house, eat and drink what you’re served, cure the sick, and proclaim the kingdom. Sounds simple enough, doesn’t it? Too simple, perhaps, for the seventy. By their own rejoicing the seventy declared that they couldn’t help taking on bigger challenges, and tackling demons. Perhaps it’s that very lack of discipline that keeps them from being called disciples here. In any event, sent out under level one of authority, namely told what to do, they returned bubbling over with enthusiasm about exercising level three, telling Jesus excitedly what they had done. Those that had gone out like meek lambs returned roaring like lions.

Jesus, however, didn’t miss that they had assumed more authority than he had given them, and gently rebuked them. “I saw the danger from what you were doing”, he told them (“I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning”), and like a good boss took steps behind the scenes to protect his subordinates, granting them the necessary powers to keep them safe. But also like a good boss Jesus rebuked them for exceeding their authority, reminding them to rejoice not in their powers, but in their redemption.

And that’s the real message here for any who would call themselves disciples of Jesus, whether in Luke’s day as the church spread out through the Gentile world, or in our day as the church spreads out through the neighbourhood – the message that we are not called to rejoice in our powers, but to rejoice in our redemption, that we are called to be lambs in the Great Shepherd’s flock, not roaring lions driving all from the waterholes of life, devouring the weak and vulnerable.

The church has had a huge problem with this message throughout the past two thousand years. There have been times when the church has proclaimed the kingdom by means of sword and gun, especially against indigenous peoples in North and South America and in Africa. There have been other eras when the church rejoiced in its authority and power through the cold and deliberate manipulation of political kingdoms and empires. There have been countless times when the church has exceeded its authority by raining fire down on those who would protest rampant abuses of power and authority – Tyndale and Huss are but two names that come to mind of those who were burned at the stake for attempting to challenge the power of the church by providing scripture in the common language of the people. It is a sadness that even today there are many in the church who delight in using personal weapons of rejection and isolation, claiming a superior faith and rejoicing that in the Lord’s name demons have been trod upon. Unfortunately in the process of tromping all over demons they have tromped all over a lot of innocent people as well.

Enthusiasm is good. A certain amount of zeal can also be appropriate. But the discipline that underlies being a disciple is also good. We would do well to hear Jesus’ gentle rebuke, not to rejoice over power and authority but to rejoice in our redemption. Softly veiled in this rebuke is a reminder of other warnings that Jesus has given to any who would follow him and proclaim themselves his. Elsewhere (Mat 7:22-23) Jesus warns that on the day of judgment some will say, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and ...” and he will reply, “Go away from me ...”. The power to act in Christ’s name has been granted to us. The authority to use it for the good of the kingdom has been granted to us. But the responsibility of using those powers, and the necessity to account for how we have used them is also there. How can we tell if we are using those powers wisely?

Perhaps the best way is to go back to the instructions that Jesus gave to the seventy, as their task is most similar to ours, and see what those instructions are. In so doing, let us not in fear fall into focusing on the harsh and angry words reserved for those who are reluctant to receive us, but instead focus on the positive instructions that started the whole process. Go into the neighbourhood, open and vulnerable, not insulating yourself upon self-reliance. Whatever house you enter, say, "Peace to this house!" Don't flit about from place to place, but enjoy the hospitality of those who welcome you. Eat and drink whatever you're served. Cure the sick, bring a message of healing not just for the body but for the soul, declaring the mercy and acceptance of God is near enough to be obtained for the asking. Go out like lambs, not lions, labouring at this task, welcoming others to the fold, rejoicing not in power but that your name has already been written in heaven by the Boss of Bosses, Christ Jesus our Lord, who will, God being our helpers, say, "well done, good and faithful servants".