



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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SECOND SUNDAY OF PENTECOST June 22, 2014

“Sheep Among Wolves”

(Matthew 10:16)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16).

Collect of the Day

O God, because Your abiding presence always goes with us, keep us aware of Your daily mercies that we may live secure and content in Your eternal love; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Have you ever been in a church where the baptismal font is not located up front, but rather, in the back, maybe even in the narthex? The idea is that baptism is our entrance into God's church, God's people, God's flock. Baptism is our entrance into the Christian faith.

We love baptisms. Sometimes the infants are crying foul and sometimes they are flashing us toothless grins. Either way we want to scoop them up hug and kiss them. However, maybe we should be warning them instead. Perhaps we should tell them, "Now your troubles are just beginning." After all, Christians are not protected from the world, but are promised that if they follow Christ, they are inviting all sorts of troubles into their lives.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, at the end of the baptism the priest places on the infant a cross necklace provided by the parents. Some priests will take the cross and even whack them a bit on the chest, bringing on tears, to show that there is a price to be paid in becoming a Christian. Bearing a cross is a painful business.

There are warning labels on cigarette cartons. Perhaps we should also advise would-be Christians that following Christ and sharing the Christian faith can be hazardous to their health. They could be putting themselves at serious risk. Our text is a sort of warning label, and it doesn't come from the Surgeon General or from me. It comes from Jesus. "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves."

To our ears that sounds paranoid and pessimistic. Hasn't Jesus ever heard that when you become Christians your financial debt melts away, no illness will come near your tent, your troubles will be over and you will enjoy peace and prosperity? Doesn't he know that?

Apparently not, or he doesn't believe it, because he's

telling his disciples they can expect opposition from all corners: from the government, from other religions, even from their own families. They will be arrested, flogged, dragged before investigative committees, betrayed by family members . . . And if we don't think this is happening today, we are ignorant to the struggles of our Christian brothers and sisters world-wide. The text says children will rise up against their parents and have them put to death. (Remember Nazi Germany when children turned their parents in? That's still happening in places like North Korea, Yemen, Somalia.) There are no promises of sweetness and light, no promises of post-baptismal bliss. There are only promises of hardship and struggle. Verse 22, "You will be hated by all for my name's sake." That is the warning label of the Christian faith and we would be foolish and naïve to ignore it, or not take it seriously, or assume it will never apply to us.

Jesus promised wolves. "Where are the wolves?" you ask. Earlier this month in Nigeria, some wandering preachers came to a village called Maidiguir. They announced everyone should gather and hear them preach about the "righteous path." The villagers did, but these were no preachers. They were wolves dressed up as sheep. They were members of Boko Haram, the same fanatical Islamist group which kidnapped hundreds of girls because they were receiving an education. And they were not there to preach but to kill, and that's what they did. 45 were slaughtered that day.

Rule of thumb: the most dangerous enemy is the one we don't recognize. The wolves in Clyman and Watertown are much more subtle and Chameleon like, but still, they are well fed. They are named Apathy and Indifference. They are named Boredom and Seduction. They are named Distraction and Addiction and Hedonism and Relativism and Sloth. As Jesus said, don't worry about those who can kill the body. Much more dangerous are those who can destroy both body and soul in hell. No one is untouchable. We are Dorothy and her helpless friends, wandering through a frightening landscape, hoping to make it home safely. If we

are to be disciples of Jesus, at the very least we will be ignored by the world, and at the worst, our faith will be destroyed.

If you're a young parent, you know all about this text. You've sheltered your little ones. You've carefully monitored the video games they play, and the T.V. shows they watch. You've taught them to abhor violence and never to lie, cheat, steal or curse. And when you drop them off for the first time at the preschool, even at a place like Good Shepherd, it can feel like you're sending out your little lamb to live among the wolves, among other children whose parents weren't nearly as careful or deliberate. I can tell you that same feeling will surface again when your child comes home excited about an invitation for a sleepover from other parents you don't know. And it will surely surface again when you drop your dear one off at the University and then drive away.

Our temptation then is to withdraw from the world. That's probably why some parents are motivated to home school their children and that's probably why some parents send their kids here, believing the world has a harder time infiltrating a Christian home or a Christian school. But no place is safe. Just one person enters this house (or any house) and the full spectrum of sin is well represented. (Even Zion Lutheran Church has been known to house a sinner or two . . . and that's just in the chancel where my friend Pastor Schempf sits.) Lutheran churches and Lutheran schools are not about isolating ourselves from the dangerous world. They are about equipping us to live faithfully in the world.

I remember reading the notes of a monk who lived in the early centuries after Christ. Trying to avoid the temptations of the world, he chose to live alone in a cave in a remote part of the Arabian Desert. For years he didn't see a soul, and still he wrote about how his conscience was tortured by temptation and sin, if not during the day, then at night in his dreams. No place is safe, not even a cave in the desert, for wherever you go, you take all the temptations of

the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh with you.

“I am sending you out” Jesus said. He’s not telling us to circle the wagons. He’s not telling us to head for the hills and pull up the road after us and build a compound and stuff it to the gills with canned food and ammo. Nor is there anything here about joining a monastery.

“I am sending you out” Jesus said. That’s where the ministry really happens: out there. “Behold”, Jesus says. Behold means “Sit up and pay attention. This is important.” “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep amidst the wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

Be wise as serpents. What does that mean? First, the snake knows what’s going on. It’s aware of its environment, sensitive to his surroundings. His entire body, it seems, is a live wire of sensation. Similarly, God wants us to be aware and alert in the world, heads up, eyes open, not easily fooled or seduced.

The snake’s instinct for self-preservation is also a helpful model. When a snake feels threatened, it’s first instinct is not to lash out, but to get out of the way. They’re shrewd in that way. They choose their battles. They avoid unnecessary contact or conflict with wolves.

We should show the same restraint and not provoke unnecessary conflict. Jesus is calling for us to be wise, prudent, discerning, to use sound judgment. This isn’t cowardice. Even Jesus did not provoke unnecessary conflict. When opposition to his ministry became too intense, he simply left the area and went elsewhere.

Be wise as serpents, but also innocent as doves. Again, think of Jesus, who was innocent, without any sin. Those who hated him could never find anything to pin on him. In the end, they resorted to lies and half-truths. So also, we are to be as innocent as doves, which means above reproach in both conduct and speech. The world is watching us, and sin in our lives gives the world an easy opening to discredit us and dismiss our witness.

Be innocent as doves. Never stoop to the ethics of the world. Follow Christ.

Later today the U.S. soccer team will play its second match in the World Cup against Portugal. Their coach, German-born Jurgen Klinsmann, doesn't want them trying to imitate any other team. That is, Italy has its own style which focuses on defense, basically parking a bus in front of their goal. Brazil has a style that reflects their culture which values spontaneity. Spain plays with a style known as tiki-taka, lots of short, quick, safe passes to slowly wear down a defense. Klinsmann doesn't want the Americans playing like any of them. It would be "un-American" he says to mimic others. He wants them to play like Americans, which means brash, aggressive, untamed. "American nature" he says, "is to take the game to the opponent."

Similarly, as disciples of Jesus, we don't want to imitate the wolves or anyone else. We are in the world but not of the world. We want to follow Jesus. We want to imitate his wisdom and his innocence. We don't need to be apologetic as Christians, but we do need to be smart about it . . . and, at the same time, innocent, above reproach.

One last thing, Jesus is not just sending us out as his witnesses. He's coming with . . . every step of the way. "Behold, I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." And he's not a passive presence. He'll be guiding us, inspiring us, giving us the words, the wisdom, the courage, the love. Surely he's protective of us. Remember, he said, "not even a sparrow will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the very hairs of your head are numbered. Therefore, fear not." As the prayer says, we can go out with good courage, knowing his hand is leading us and his love supporting us.

Will our witness produce results? Don't count on it. Jesus said, "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next." That doesn't sound as if he expects success. But he also says, "He that endures to the end will be saved." That's the promise we need. In other words, we are not called to be successful, but to be faithful, and the faithful will be saved. So go out into the world knowing you are loved of God, redeemed, forgiven, and being led by him. You are his

baptized people. In the end, not even the gates of hell nor all the subtle wolves of this world will prevail. Thanks be to God. Amen.

