

Luke 10:1-20

The Word of the Lord from Luke 10: "And he said to them, „ saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

This past week we celebrated Independence Day, the birthday of our nation; and as we give thanks to God for the land in which we live, we do well to remember that freedom is bought with a price. Plenty of people have served with courage, selflessness and sacrifice so that we might enjoy all sorts of freedoms, not the least of which is the freedom to gather here openly in worship of the one true God. Sometimes, we hear the stories of courage and heroism in service to our country. Often we don't. Sometimes, it's because the heroes are quiet, humble sorts. Sometimes, it's because the security around the events is so tight that the heroes are never made public, their medals locked in a safe and never to see the light of day. Sometimes, it's because it's a matter of standing guard so that the enemy has no easy route of attack. But freedom requires ongoing vigilance; and when we forget the ongoing strength and stamina needed to maintain our freedom and safety, we're likely to start to take that freedom for granted, to consider it no big thing.

Given today's Gospel lesson, we might say the same about the work of the Church. Strengthened and protected by her Lord, it's the Church that stands guard and fends off sin, death and devil. It's the work of the Lord through His Church which ultimately rescues from hell, from eternal chains and loss of freedom. In a world beset by darkness and evil, Christ gives to one institution power over the devil himself. You guessed it: the Church. You and me.

That's huge. It is a privilege in which we ought to rejoice and a responsibility which we ought to take seriously. However, the devil, world and sinful flesh all work hard to infiltrate, to lull, and to make us think that nothing special is going on. Don't listen to them, though: listen to Christ in our Gospel lesson.

As we mentioned last Sunday, Jesus has set His face toward Jerusalem: He is on His way to the cross. As He makes His way there, He sends out 72 in pairs to every town along the way, and He gives them their marching orders. They're to pack light, with no moneybag, knapsack or extra sandals. They're to move quickly to their destinations, devoting no time to idle conversation on the road. When they arrive at a house, they are to greet it with peace; and if they are welcomed, they are to stay. They're to speak the message that Jesus gives them. They are to heal the sick. If they are not welcome in a town, they are to leave, but not before declaring once again the message Jesus gives them.

The message is simple enough: "The kingdom of God has come near."

If you ask me, it doesn't look all that spectacular, this scene of two guys without a carry-on doing a little talking and a little sick-care. Their speech isn't even original: they're repeating the words of another. Can what they do really matter? Absolutely.

Listen to the consequences for those who reject the message: Jesus says, "I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town." And if Capernaum rejects them, Jesus says that the town "shall be brought down to Hades." But it's not just the dire warnings: there's the positive results. The 72 return to Jesus and say, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" Jesus confirms, saying "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." They've spoken His Word, and the sick have been healed. They've even made demons flee. Furthermore, Jesus tells them, "I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you."

Really? This is about the eternal destiny of towns-full of people? It looks like pairs of guys walking from town to town, traveling light and talking a little, repeating what Jesus told them to say. It's not exactly the sort of drama that makes for a Hollywood blockbuster.

It may look pretty tame, but it's not about the look. People are healed and demons are sent packing. This is stuff that only God can do, which is exactly what's going on. The key to what's going on is this: "The one who hears you hears Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me, and the one who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me."

It's the Lord who works these miracles, and He does so by His Word. And in His wisdom, according to His plan, He deploys these 72 to speak His Word. Sent by Him and speaking His Word, they're speaking on His authority. They speak His Word of grace, and His grace gets rid of sin and its wages. They speak that Word to those who are sick, and they're healed. They speak it to those who are possessed by demons, and the demons flee away. These 72 wield extraordinary power as they speak God's Word as He intended. But it is His Word and it is His power: they're simply the messengers, and the power doesn't belong to them. Thus Jesus tells them, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." The best news for them is not that Christ has used them to deliver that grace to others: the messenger can himself be an unbeliever and lost, even if he's teaching the Word correctly to others. No, the best news for them is that Christ has used His Word to deliver His grace to them.

So, 72 guys in 36 pairs, walking from town to town and talking. But their talk is the Word of God, and by it even the devil is sent packing.

The Lord entrusts that Word to His Church. He entrusts His Word to His Church here, at the corner of Orchard and Cassia. The Lord has not changed, and His Word has not lost its power. So here, when the Word is preached and the Sacraments administered according to that Word, when the Word is sung and spoken and confessed and shared, the Lord is still working those same miracles here as He did through the 72 in our text: sins are forgiven, disease defeated and even the devil is chased away.

Sins are forgiven. That's the key to the other miracles. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, dwelt among us and went to the cross to die for our sins. Risen again, He alone has the power to forgive, and His Word is the means by which He does the work. Only forgiveness delivers from sin. Therapy can teach you to live with it, time can get you to forget it and the right company will help you deny it's wrong, but only forgiveness can take the sin away. That's the forgiveness given by Christ in His Word—the Word that He gives to you to speak.

Therefore, only that forgiveness can deliver from hell. Armies can stop invasions and organizations can provide relief from all sorts of hellish, disastrous situations on this planet, but man is powerless against hell. It's inexorable, far too powerful. But the Word of Christ looses sins and sets you free; and if you are free of sin, the gates of hell are closed and the gates of heaven are opened. Only God's Word can do that—the Word that He entrusts to His Church. Here.

That Word heals, too. It delivers from disease. Medicine can help with this life: often when a disease strikes, doctors can put a stop to it—and for the work of medical professionals we give great thanks, because they are God's gifts for the preservation of health and life in this world. But where medicine puts a stop to one disease, another will eventually come; and if it is stopped, another will follow. That's the ongoing battle of preserving health in this world, and eventually one disease or other injury wins and brings death. But the Word of Christ delivers from disease—maybe not immediately, but ultimately. When the 72 in our text spoke, people were healed on the spot. This was not to teach you that God will always heal immediately whenever His Word is spoken, but that His Word has the power to deliver you ultimately from all disease, according to His will. This is finally done on the Last Day, when the Lord raises you from the dead. No matter how hard man tries, he can't beat death—the best he can do is postpone it as the Lord allows. But the Word of Christ we speak here gives eternal healing and everlasting life. That's the Word that Jesus entrusts to His Church. Here.

That Word delivers from the devil, too. It sends Satan fleeing away. We've recently heard a Gospel lesson or two about demon possession, and how those possessed were terrifying to those around them—remember, for instance, the possessed man who lived among the tombs. What can man do to defeat Satan? Usually, all man can do is deny him as an old fable, which suits the devil just fine. There is one religion in Turkey that's all about appeasing the devil: if you can't beat him, the best you can do is try to strike up a good relationship. But man can't defeat Satan. Christ can, and has: He defeated him at the cross when He died for the sins of the world. See, when Jesus took away all of your sin, He robbed the devil of everything he could use against you. Satan is called "the Accuser" for good reason, because Scripture records him going before God and accusing, saying, "So-and-so is sinful and unholy. He can't be with you because of his sin, so he's got to be mine instead." But Christ died for all of those sins, took them all away. Satan has nothing left to accuse with—he's got no evidence because Jesus took it all away. Thus the Gospel makes the devil fall from heaven, because he's got no accusations to bring against the people of God anymore. The Word of Christ defeats the devil and sends Him packing. That's the Word that Jesus entrusts to His Church. Here.

This Divine Service may look no more remarkable than 36 pairs of men walking from village to village in our Gospel lesson. The view from the pulpit is that it's about 9:30 on a Sunday morning with a blend of relatively harmless looking people. But the Lord is present here with His Word. And as long as He is present with His Word, sin, disease, death, hell and Satan are all vanquished. They don't stand a chance, because Christ has defeated them all.

Name any other institution on earth where sin, disease, death, hell and Satan are all beaten. There isn't one. The Church is the Lord's outpost and fortress against all of His enemies on earth. Many would look at this service with contempt, but do not be deceived: the proclamation of the Gospel and the singing of Christ's praises are what hold back sin and devil, because the Lord restrains such evil by His Word. The prayers prayed by the people of God in Jesus' name are powerful acts as they entrust all cares to God and call upon Him to act according to His Word.

But all of that said, here is something better: "Do not rejoice in this, but rejoice that your names are written in the book of life."

When troops stand guard against invading forces, they know that they may have to sacrifice their lives as part of their service. It is not so for you: you do not fight sin, death and hell with the understanding that you may have to sacrifice yourself to God's wrath to save others. That was for Christ to do on the cross, and He has sacrificed Himself for the sins of the world. As you are one entrusted with His Word, you wield that weapon against evil with the knowledge that you do not have to die to save others. No, as you rejoice in the power of the Word, you know that it is for you, too. By His Word, Christ declares that He has written your name in the Book of Life. Salvation is yours.

The devil hates the Church, but he knows that the Church will never perish. Since he can't destroy either Christ or the Church, that leaves you. He's fallen from heaven and can't accuse you before God, so he'll whisper accusations in your ear. He'll keep reminding you of past sins, haunting you with past guilt, attempting to persuade you that there's no forgiveness for you, that you're lost. But you're not lost because Christ has won. So against the devil's temptations, you hold up Christ and His Word, remind the devil that he's the loser and say, "Jesus' Word of grace has sent you fleeing often before, and He has given that grace to me. I am not yours, Satan, because I am His. He's written my name in the Book of Life."

It is the same when the devil tries to overwhelm you with grief or fear of sickness or death or hell. All of these are enemies far too great for you and me, but it is not left to you and me to fight them. Christ is the One who has fought these foes, and He has defeated them. He tells you so in His Word. So instead of trying to defend yourself, you speak His victorious, grace-giving Word. Sickness, death and hell will not get the best of you. Sickness and death will plague for a while, but they're already beaten, too. Christ will raise you up to everlasting life, because your name is written in the book of life.

The devil will keep on attacking, along with his allies of sin, death and hell, until the Last Day. Although the war is won, the battle rages—and it often seems like evil has the upper hand. But here, and now, by the power of God's Word, evil is beaten back once again. It cannot overcome you, because Christ does more than entrust the Church with His Word for others. He speaks it to you. He tells you that your name is written in the Book of Life, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen