



July 6 – Lessons from 21 Years

This text was the text on my very first Sunday as a parish pastor, July 4th, 2004. I remember feeling a little overwhelmed by the jump into a solo call. There were always others around to bounce ideas off. When doing pulpit supply, there was always someone there to help walk you through the service. Now, I was expected to know what I was doing, without someone there to guide me.

It felt a lot like walking out among the wolves. I made many mistakes that first Sunday. Don't get me wrong. I still make mistakes. That first Sunday was simply home to a lot more of them, from moving the large leaders edition of the LBW, to changing the page on the large Bible on the lectern. I may have even lost my place a time or two in the process.

There was a feeling of imposter syndrome. It felt like I was in over my head, like I did not belong. Have you ever felt like that? It is a little scary. The self-doubt creeps in and you can easily start to spiral downward.

I imagine the 70 feeling a bit like that as they are sent out into the world. Jesus sends them out with nothing but what they are wearing. They are sent into areas which may not be the most receptive to what they had to say. These were fishermen and tax collectors. They weren't seminary trained (as if that makes one any more qualified for such a mission). They had to be a little scared too. I empathize with them.

They figured it out. They were able to find their voices. They cast out demons and healed people. They led people to believe in God. They come back as heroes and are excited about it. You can imagine the joy as they returned, so much so that the Gospel points that out, "the seventy returned with joy..." It is a great feeling when you find out you are able to do more than you could ever ask or imagine. I am excited for them.

I also relate to them. There were years, earlier in my career, where I had a similar feeling. I felt invincible as a pastor. I had found my voice. I was able to serve in various capacities from Synod Council and Assembly planning, to serving on the Church Council of the whole ELCA. It is easy for me to imagine the excitement, joy, and fearlessness expressed by the disciples as they returned from this mission.

Jesus' response to this feeling is quite humbling. "I watched Satan fall from heaven..." That is a strong reminder that it is not difficult at all to lose your way. If your ego, or sense of self, becomes inflated, it can be your undoing. Like a flash of lightning, you can fall from the heights of heaven. That was true of Satan, and it can be true of any of us. Jesus starts with that warning that is a lesson to all of us. Don't inflate your sense of self.

Jesus goes on to tell us not to rejoice in our giftedness or abilities, the ways that we deliver the message, or the ways that others are proven wrong in the process. Do not rejoice in this, but instead, "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Some may hear that as judgement, as if to say, "My name is written and yours is not." I hear it as grace. Our names are written, not because of what we can do, or have done. Our names are written because of God's love for the world. Period. Jesus reminds us not to look with joy at the downfall of others. Anyone could suffer a similar fall. Do not judge. Support others as you are able. And, most importantly, rejoice in the love that God has for you, and for all.

Through these 7 cycles through the lectionary, I have lived this text. I have journeyed through the fear of being sent, and the boastfulness that comes from success. I have had times when my ego was inflated, and times it was empty. What I have learned is what Jesus tells the disciples. The true joy is not in our gifts, or abilities, it is not in our being sent, or anything we have done. The true joy is in grace, in a God who could love even a person like me, and like you. No matter what. Amen.

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