

A Numbers Game?  
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

O.

That's not a letter . . . or, an exclamation . . . that's a number . . . the number zero. Zero . . . zilch . . . nothing . . . none.

That number is the number of people I have personally brought to faith in Christ.

I deliberately say it like that because that's how it was said to me at a mission conference many years ago . . . in my first parish, in fact . . . I was still a wet-around-the-ears pastor . . . impressionable . . . the speaker at the conference was very enthusiastic . . . very passionate . . . and at the end of his talk he quoted this text from Luke and then he asked: "How many people have you personally brought to faith in Christ?"

So, did a quick count in my head . . . and then a more detailed count . . . and the answer was . . . 0!  
Twenty something years later the answer is still zero!

That's the sum total of all the people I can take the credit for becoming Christians. I desperately wish I could tell you that I had at least one scalp . . . one notch on the belt . . . one fish in the net . . . then, at least I might have a little bit of credibility when preaching these kind of mission texts . . . and, better than that, secretly, I could tell myself I've done my bit . . . at least I got one!

But, it's not to be . . . the number is still zero. That's a bit embarrassing . . . maybe for you too?  
Embarrassing until I read the words of this classic mission text and I don't at all hear the question "How many?" And, I notice that Jesus sends the seventy out like lambs not like statisticians! In fact I don't read in it anything about saving souls . . . about making Christians . . . about notches on the belt . . . even about bringing anyone to faith in Christ.

What I notice first about this text is that it implies a lot of 'giving up' . . . giving *things* up . . . take no purse . . . no bag . . . no sandals! But, most of all giving up our desperate desire to be independent . . . and recognising and embracing a reliance on others . . . on each other . . . on God!

Maybe that's where mission starts? We are not solo acts . . . we are not lone rangers . . . we are not independent . . . we are part of a community of faith . . . we are part of the seventy . . . and that seventy is a community that extends beyond St John's . . . beyond the Lutheran Church of Australia . . . beyond any national, or cultural boundaries . . . it extends to encompass God's church . . . that one holy, catholic and apostolic church. Together we are sent. Together we support each other. Together we bear each other's burdens and share each other's joys . . . we never go alone.

And, who are these people Jesus sends out? Who are the seventy?

First they are people who are not self-reliant . . . and they don't have to have all the Is dotted and Ts crossed before they go . . . they're not prepared for every eventuality.

They are people who are willing to accept hospitality . . . to accept help . . . they are inter-dependent.

Then, when they go into the world, they are people of peace . . . people who bring peace. This mission ministry can be a very gentle ministry. They don't force their message down anyone's throat . . . they don't coerce, or insist on anyone even listening. Only when they have been welcomed do they open their mouths to speak . . . and what do they say? Some long winded, planned out, theologically precise sermon? No! Do they say: "Repent you sinners!"? Hardly! No, the message is: 'The kingdom of God is at hand for you'. Did you catch the 'for you' bit? Their mission is not to tell anyone what to do, but to tell what God has done for them. No arguments. No debates. No obsessing about success or failure. These are the seventy . . . these are the people involved in God's mission.

So, how does this translate to today? Well, it translates to today like this: to be involved in God's mission in the world you just have to be who you are. You just have to be who you are. It's as simple and as difficult as that.

You don't have to try to be someone you're not, just be who you are. And, who are you? You are a person of faith . . . faith . . . that means you trust . . . trust means you're not trying to be independent, you're dependent. You are a person called by God. He chose you. You are a person of peace.

But . . . best of all . . . you are people whose names have been written in the book of life. Not because of anything you have done, or not done . . . not because you've ticked the right boxes . . . not because you've got this number to above zero . . . no, your names are written in the book of life because of what Jesus has done for you. Because the kingdom of God is at hand for you. You are a new creation, that's who you are. And, that's where mission begins . . . not with saving souls . . . or, filling up these pews . . . it's about being who you are.

Now, some might say that's just a convenient excuse for not doing anything . . . some might say I've just let you off the hook. I'd say they're right . . . it could be an excuse for not doing anything, and I have let you off the hook . . . no, not I, Jesus . . . he's let you off the hook . . . by his death and resurrection . . . by the free gift of his grace . . . but, that's what the gospel does . . . it gets us off the hook. The hook of the law . . . the hook of God's demands . . . we're off that hook.

So, you don't have to tell anyone about Jesus . . . but you can. You can be who you are. You see, as much as I desperately wish I could boast of one person brought to Christ by my efforts, I have something even better and more amazing than that I can talk about . . . my name is written in the book of life! Yes, even me! The one who keeps failing evangelism 101 . . . my name is written in the book of life . . . God is for me not against me! Incredible!

Which brings me back to this number. O. That's the number zero. Zero . . . zilch . . . none . . . nothing. That's actually a number that causes me great joy . . . because it reminds me of what separates us from God. Nothing . . . zilch.

If this was a mission conference like that one I went to all those years ago and I wanted to inspire you into mission, I too would end with a question. But, my question would be: “What has God done for you?”

Today the kingdom of God has come near to you. Go on your way.

Amen.

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