



The question comes up periodically regarding the difference between a church and a social club. After all, we as St. John's the church do get together for wonderful social events. We host educational programs. We care for those in our community that are in need. So how are we different from Junior League, the Kiwanis, the Eagles, or the bridge group?

James Luther Adams, a Unitarian theologian, says that "church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human."¹ At its best, the church is the place where forgiveness is given **and** received. Where repentance is a part of our regular cycle of worship as we acknowledge that we are humans and not God. And where redemption and new life is possible through the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It has been said that the church is a hospital for sinners. Jesus reminded us that he did not come to those who were well but rather to help those who know that they are not always well. The church is a place where we can disagree and learn to do so without personal attacks or being disagreeable about our differences. Speak our minds in love while recognizing the Christ in the person with whom we disagree.

Eugene Peterson, the author of The Message, a paraphrase of the Bible, puts the opening of our text from Galatians this way: "Live creatively, friends. If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him, saving your critical comments for yourself. You might be needing forgiveness before the day's out. ... Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given ... Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life."²

The church is a place, I hope, where we listen to all - not just to those who wear a collar or are in positions of authority. The lesson from Second Kings points out that it is not always those with worldly authority who have wisdom or knowledge that we would do well to listen to. It is an Israelite slave who gave advice to the wife of the army commander, Naaman that would lead to Naaman's healing. It was the prophet Elisha who sent word to

¹ James Luther Adams in Phillip Gulley The Evolution of Faith (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 184.

² Eugene Peterson. The Message (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 1714.

2 Kings 5:1-14; Ps. 30; Galatians 6: 1-16; Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

the king of Israel to send Naaman to Elisha for God's healing to take place. It was Naaman's servants who reminded Naaman that he was being silly to pout because Elisha had not given Naaman something difficult to do in order to be healed – although I doubt, somehow, the servants told Naaman to his face that pouting did not seem to be an appropriate response. After all, speaking truth to power can have negative repercussions!

Each of us has authority granted to us by God. We are beloved children of God called to be witnesses to the love and grace bestowed on us as God's creation. We are called by the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all the earth- not only by proclaiming God's truth as we understand it, but also by how we live and move and have our being.

Our example comes in the Gospel lesson today when Jesus sends the 70 out ahead of him to preach the Gospel and to heal the sick. Jesus tells them they are few but they have a worthy cause – to bring the kingdom of God near to earth. To tell those who might not have heard the message that God loves us.

Jesus does not tell the 70 that their mission will be free from harm – or that it will always be successful. Indeed, he says, the 70 are like lambs among the wolves. The potential danger, the potential for harm, is real.

But for those who are willing to hear the Word of God, they will receive the peace of God. Whether or not they have shelter for the night. Whether or not they have food for their bellies, or clothes or sandals to protect their bodies against the ravages of walking the road, the 70 know that God is with them. They know that their mission is to spread the Word of God to every town and place. There is no place where God does not wish to be made known.

There is no place where God does not wish for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to be made a possibility. There is no place where God's love and God's grace is not extended to every living creature. But we humans are not always faithful laborers. The 70 are expressly cautioned by Jesus when they return to avoid rejoicing that spirits submitted to them. As always, the focus is on doing God's will and work in the world. Today, it is on our doing our part to make the kingdom of God come near.

Just a few days ago we celebrated the 4th of July- a day marking the separation and bid for independence of the American colonies from Great Britain. Some hold that I should not even mention the 4th of July- a secular holiday- in a church. Their understanding of the First Amendment would require no mention in a religious establishment of secular government and vice versa.

I applaud and support the government not imposing a particular religion or theology upon me (what is meant by the separation of church and state). At the same time, my values have been formed and are being continually informed by my faith. Therefore, for me it is not really possible to **totally** separate church and state in this sense. So, I will acknowledge secular holidays such as the 4th of July from this pulpit. We will use the prayers in our Prayer Book for our country and at other appropriate times when we also celebrate secular holidays. I will **not**, however, suggest how you vote or comment on the positions of any particular candidate or court decision.

2 Kings 5:1-14; Ps. 30; Galatians 6: 1-16; Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

At the same time, what happens in our secular world helps us to refine our faith. An example of the dual nature of church and state might be seen in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. It contains incredibly moving words that we would do well to read each day as we strive to live a life that gives witness to Jesus the Christ:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan--to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

Regardless of your political views, I believe this vision of Lincoln's reflects the call of God to each of us. Feed your neighbor. Care for the widow and orphan. Forgive and be forgiven. This is the mission of the 70 sent by Jesus ahead of him to every town and place.

The mission is not about our status, our possessions or our abilities. It is about being the laborer even when there are few – it is about bringing the kingdom of God near to those with whom we come into contact. It is stepping out in faith with love towards neighbor as one who is loved by God.

To me, this is the vision on which this country was founded. It is a vision which is entitled to – and in my view must be celebrated. We look back, yes, to that first July 4th. We also are called to look forward to when the kingdom of God is not just near but is here – present and known to all. Live creatively, friends and know that the Kingdom of God has come near. You are called to be one of the laborers and you will be given what you need for the task that God has set before you. Do not be afraid.