

**Sermon for the Commencement Service
The School of Theology, Sewanee, Tenn.**

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Isaiah 2:2-4, Psalm 96:1-7, Ephesians 2:13-22, Luke 10:1-9

Good morning! I greet you in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And, I bring you the greetings of your brothers and sisters in Christ in the Diocese of Atlanta: 56,000 souls in 109 worshipping communities spread over middle and north Georgia – men women, children, teenagers and feisty seniors!

Thank you to President McCardell, the Regents and Trustees for the kind invitation to be with you on this glad and important occasion. Thank you also to the Dean of the School of Theology, Bishop J. Neil Alexander, my bishop, and his excellent staff and faculty for all you do to perfume the church and the world with the Gospel of Jesus.

I've come to share my heart with you. And what is on my heart this morning are the words of Jesus as he appoints and sends 70 people into the world, privileged with the work of ministry. Can't you hear Jesus' graduation speech of long ago, given in some dusty, natural amphitheater? *There's a great harvest but so few who will labor, so pray. Pray that the harvest Lord will send harvest laborers. Then go! Go and be among wolves as sheep. And say. Say peace, and say most especially the kingdom is near.* From those couple of verses from Luke's 10th chapter, we are reminded that the purpose of the church is to pray, go and say.

For Jesus, harvest, laborers and prayer go together. You would expect Jesus to begin with prayer. Jesus was a layperson deeply connected to God in prayer. He climbed a mountain, prayed and was transfigured. He prayed early in the morning and walked on the water. He prayed, and demons disappeared. He prayed and found an ocean of selflessness in the loneliness of Gethsemane. For Jesus prayer was the first step in unlocking harvest, internal and external.

And if Jesus is right, then we should pray tried and true prayers. Prayers that celebrate our communion with the Lord of the Harvest. Prayers that take us up to the heights of adoration. And prayers that ready us for the long journey of oblation. Prayers that rejoice in the fact that God is real, able, good and generous. Prayers that acknowledge that God can do anything but fail. Prayers like the 96th psalm. Didn't you feel a little more buoyant, a little more ready to serve, a bit more confirmed when we said, "Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing and bless God's name. Declare God's glory and God's

wonders among all people.” And then the psalmist just geeks out on God! “Oh the majesty and power of God’s presence. For God is great and greatly to be praised.” This is the kind of prayer you and I must take up together and individually: breath taking on flesh, and flesh adorned with divine joy, and joy that is public and unashamed of its source.

But not only that, Jesus said pray with a purpose. “Pray, that God would send people.” Now there is a great strategy for any admissions office. Pray. Add your psychic and spiritual energy to the river of God’s will. Pray. Pray that people will forsake folly and self-centeredness. Pray that men and women will offer themselves to the enterprise of enlarging God’s celebrity in the world and the well-being of people. Pray. Pray that rocky ground of material concerns will not choke the seedlings of God. And pray that all of us might grow up into the full stature of Christ.

And as we pray, for those that are to come, we should remember that we are here because somebody else prayed! Somebody before us loved God and wanted for the world what God wants. We are laborers in God’s harvest not simply as a result of our astute choices, but because somebody prayed with their brilliant research. We are here because somebody prayed with their clear-minded administration. Here because somebody prayed with their generous checkbook. Here because somebody prayed with their courage to challenge old norms with new competencies. If we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, they’re not standing silent on heaven’s balcony. They’re praying and praising God for what God has already done, what God is doing now, and what God will do through us and the laborers on the way.

II.

But prayer is just the beginning. After the praying comes the going. To pray and not go is to frustrate grace. It is to leave a great symphony unfinished. It’s to leave a cake half baked. “Go,” Jesus says. There’s a whole life for the follower in that one simple little word. Implicit in “go” is *I go with you. I go before you. You don’t go alone. You won’t go without. There’s no place you can go where I am not. And, of course, go for it! Go and see that I am not slack concerning my promises. Go and see how true my word is. Go and find out, amidst your wounds, and the wounds of others, that my grace is sufficient.* Go and know the bottomlessness of my faithfulness.

In the real world we find the courage to go at Jesus’ command because at some blessed moment, it finally dawns on us, the lengths that God in Christ has gone to find us. The great distances He has had to travel – over our fear, pride and defensiveness. Over our smallness, vanity and rank worldliness.

Over in the book of Ephesians, we hear Paul (or at least words attributed to Paul – you have to be careful with Professor Holloway around) say that the labor of God in Jesus Christ was to go. That God is in the closing-distance business. “We were far off,” he wrote, “but now we’ve been brought near by Christ’s blood. He’s broken down dividing walls. And even forged a path through death to life. So that we are no longer strangers and aliens but citizens with the saints.” To know that this passage refers to us, refers to you and me, is to be found. And paradoxically, to be found is to hand over our inner GPS to God, which is our reasonable worship, and to say to God, Let’s go; you don’t have to drag me around one more day.

Where are you willing to go for a God this good? The great Carole King said that this way, “When my soul was in the lost and found, you came along to claim it; I didn’t know just what was wrong with me till your kiss helped me name it. Now I’m no longer doubtful of what I’m living for, and if I make you happy, I don’t need to do more.”

There’s no better finishing school than the learning that comes from going. The prodigal son had to go to the pig trough before he cherished the love of the father. Beautiful Esther had to go to the king unannounced to find her courage. And, Paul had to go on his missionary journeys before he could say, “Let the one who boasts, boast in God.”

What is it that Jesus wants us to learn when He sends us like sheep among wolves? One of America’s great mystics, Howard Thurman, said that “the moral stature of a person is determined by the weapons he uses to fight against the adversary.” If that is true, then Jesus is a moral colossus. When you think like Jesus, sheep vs. wolves ain’t a fair fight. Jesus knows that evil is cold, afraid, small and finite, but that love towers and transforms. That love is patient and has no end point. Jesus knows that the wolf will have its day, but that the sheep of his pasture will have His forever. So we go not as the world goes with cunning and deceit. We are not in the world as sheep in wolf’s clothing. We go into the world radically dependent on God. In vogue and out of vogue, shining in contrast. We go increasing in the certainty that love is the most deadly and devastating weapon there is. And so we go.

III.

Woody Allen famously said that “80 percent of life is just showing up.” And while Allen is a good filmmaker, I think his math is off. I say that because “change doesn’t roll in on the wheels of inevitability.” And, because we know evil flourishes with the silence of good people. And better still, because Jesus told us that “what I whisper to you, then shout from the rooftops.” To pray and to go is made better by having something to say. The church still has a lot to say. Wherever you go, Jesus told us, say peace. Not peace as

in the absence of war. Or peace as in the presence of material comfort and ease. But say peace, as in the peace the world can neither give nor take away. Say peace, as in the gift that comes down from Calvary, that comes from knowing that death is not our master. Say peace when you show up because you've experienced it, even in the middle of the storms of life. And say peace when you go because that's what you've found in service to God through the church. Ours is a peace that comes from knowing that goodness and mercy aren't merely following us, but that goodness and mercy are pursuing us. Literally chasing us down! Go everywhere and say peace, Jesus said. Some people will get it, some won't. You're not responsible for that. Plant the seed. Say peace.

Jesus closes his speech with one final instruction to us harvest laborers. *Don't forget to tell people that the kingdom of God is near.* What a privilege it is to be baptized. To be a living, breathing Exhibit A that God has done something in the past and that past thing is still unfolding, still laying claim to this world. Nearness is God's promise to us. And, "God is near" is our three-word sermon every Sunday. Near to us in healing and provision. Near to us for direction and correction. At the center of God's kingdom, at the core of the kingdom's ecology, is the faithfulness of God. "That I will never leave you or forsake you." That the tabernacle of God is among people. And so God's kingdom is near. It's already and still coming, and we are its heralds. We have this treasure in earthen vessels.

Just like Ezekiel's mystical vision, God's kingdom is a wheel in a wheel in a wheel. So don't worry, even with a fancy seminary degree you won't be able to articulate the whole thing. No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived, neither has any tongue adequately confessed the goodness of God or the faithfulness of God or the genius of God. So pray, pray like Myrlie Evers prayed: "There's something within me that holds the reins. There's something within in me that banishes the pain. There's something within me I can't explain. Thank Almighty God there's something within me."

And go like the prophets of old did, armed only with their little "thus sayeth the Lord," bold and sharp in purpose. And say kingdom words every chance you can. Say like Luther: "And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us; we will not fear for God has willed his truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim. We tremble not for him. His rage we can endure. For lo his doom is sure. One little word shall fell him." Or say like Wesley, "O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemer's praise, the glory of my God and king, the triumphs of his grace."

So pray and go and then, for Christ's sake, say something.