

Rev. Libby Davis Manning, speaker.

Alma Presbyterian Church, along with Alma College faculty, staff, and students, I bring you greetings from Wabash College, where I am on staff, and it is such an honor to be with you today. Alma, Michigan, holds fond memories for me. My uncle, James Tipton, taught in the English department at Alma College in the 1970's-80's, and was department chair for a time. My brother and sister and I would come to Alma to spend a few weeks in the summer to visit our 2 cousins, and one summer Uncle Jim let me tag along to his summer creative writing class. I thought it was amazing to be among with the Alma college students, and it is a tribute to the character of Alma College students that you accepted a young person among you in the class. So it is good to return to this community with strong Presbyterian roots and teaching, as we gather today to install the next pastor of Alma Presbyterian Church, and the next Chaplain of Alma College, Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy. It is a good day to be the Church.

So here's my simple question on this auspicious day: which was the greater gift Jesus bestowed on the 70 disciples he sent out: the power to heal and cast out demons in the local community? Or the power to see and hear what needs casted out in the first place? Which was the greater gift?

We'll return to that question, but let's get a sense of the local landscape in this portion of Luke first. In chapter 9 of Luke's gospel, Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem, scripture says, which means, Jesus is preparing for, and now moving toward his death and crucifixion in Jerusalem. He knows his time on earth is limited. He therefore wants to teach the disciples everything they need for a life of discipleship between now and when he unjustly goes to the Cross in Jerusalem.

College students, its like what your parents did before you left for college. They started to realize sometime in your senior year in high school, Oh my goodness, my time with my child living in my home is coming to an end, they are going to leave for Alma College on this date, so I need to be sure this child of mine knows everything he or she needs to know for a life apart from me. Now, I know this happens because I have twins who are seniors in high school, going to college in the fall. I sympathize with Jesus here, who wants to equip his disciples with what they need for full rich lives. So what does Jesus do?

In Luke 10, He appoints 70 disciples, roughly the size of this gathering, tells them to pair up (because this life of following Jesus is never done in isolation—Christianity is a team sport, not an individual sport--we deeply need each other to do the work God calls us to do, and to sustain ourselves in that work—we need each other) so pair up, Jesus says, and go into the local communities.

And Jesus is very clear-eyed, very sober and very realistic about what it will be like for the 70 when they go into the local communities. He doesn't sugar-coat it. He tells them that they will be like lambs into the midst of wolves. Friends, the crucifixion of Jesus makes clear to us then and now, that there is rejection in this work related to following Jesus, there is a cost to messing with the powers that be in a local community. The crucifixion of our Lord makes that very clear. And the resurrection of Jesus reminds us that death and rejection is not the final word. The final word ultimately is hope, is life, so surround yourself promise-people, and stay the course when it feels like the wolves are surrounding.

So go into the local community, Jesus says, but carry no purse, no bag, no sandals. Why not have those things? I direct a program at Wabash College in Indiana that Pastor Pekich-Bundy is a part of, and together with pastors across Indiana of all Christian denominations, we think about how early career pastors having arrived in a new community, get to know their local community? Because the church doesn't exist for itself. The church exists for the well-being and the flourishing of the local community, and by extension, the world. At the center of the Christian tradition, is the flourishing of life, for which Jesus came—John 10:10—I came that you would have life.. and have it abundantly...in all its fullness—meaning, life-filled relationships, life-filled local communities, life-filled healthy physical bodies.

Consider, that Jesus didn't tell the 70 to go to the synagogue and hang out there all day together. He told the disciples to spread out go into the local community and share meals with the locals. Hear their stories. Get to know them. By doing so, Jesus tells them, you'll discern what the work of the disciples needs to be. You'll learn who or what group is not well in a community. You'll discern, where God at work there. Where is evil at work there? And Jesus is says, where there is evil and evil systems, and systems of oppression for anyone, cast it out. Work together to address it and get rid of it. (And that's where Jesus is very clear-eyed in saying that is not easy work, that's when the wolves will come out, but it's our work to do as the Christian Church. That's why the Church desperately matters, dear people.)

And Jesus goes on to tell us, you don't need to bring a bunch of stuff with you to do this-- You don't need supplies, you don't need tools, you don't need bags of supplies. None of it. Instead, show up and build relationship. Show up and share meals. Show up and receive hospitality of the locals. So don't bring a bag full of stuff. The bag full of stuff is going to distract you from the work of listening and building relationship with the local community. Without your bag, you're more likely to listen to the stories, and share meals, and to rely on the Holy Spirit for next steps, instead of being dangerously self-reliant, and falling into that posture.

See, when we, the Church, bring our bags of stuff, we Jesus-people default to a posture of, 'we have what THEY the non-jesus-people need. Let me foist it on you. Jesus is saying, don't do that. Don't come into a community thinking you-jesus-people have the answers that they-nonjesus-people don't have.

So in our program at Wabash College, when we think about casting out hunger and poverty in our local community, we first talk to the local food pantry leaders, we first talk to government officials handling policy on this issue. We first talk to the experts on this issue, then when we are better informed of the complex issues surround poverty and hunger in our local community, when we've sufficiently built relationships with people working on the ground in this area, then we are better positioned to work with local leaders to cast out hunger and poverty in a meaningful long term way, as opposed to a quick, short term fix that doesn't have any staying-power.

I think the church has gotten this posture wrong in the last several centuries—the church thinks it doesn't need to partner with other local organizations. Conversely, the church gets it right, when we partner with local organizations to do the long, slow adaptive work of changing and casting out evil systems that are in place.

After getting that straight, Jesus tells them in Luke 10 hey, when you go into a local community, some will accept you, some will reject you. That's the deal. Accept that that's the deal. Not everyone is going to like you. That's fine. Trust the holy spirit in all this, and go.

So the 70 go out and they begin listening, and eating meals in the local community, and healing people and healing unhealthy systems in Jesus' name. Up to this point in scripture, Jesus has done all the healing. Now, The 70, In Jesus' name, confront evil spirits and evil systems at work in the local community that keep some oppressed. They touch the hemorrhaging women whom society has outcast.

They cast out the demons. They cured the sick. And scripture says that they come back OVERJOYED. They return astonished at what is done in Jesus' name.

So this portion of scripture ends by Jesus praying over them, and privately saying to them, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For many prophets and kings want to see, but don't. They desired to hear what you heard, but can't."

Now my next question to you is, why were the disciples able to see and hear what prophets and kings wanted to, but didn't? I wonder if it is because prophets and kings operate from their grand remote intimidating palaces and grand intimidating places of worship. They are far removed from the local community, thus not IN the local community, or heaven forbid receiving the meals and lodging and simple hospitality of folks in the local community, which is where relationships are built, and honest real stories are shared, and table fellowship is had, as my mother and I shared with the Pekich-Bundy family last evening.

It is interesting to me that Jesus was quick to advise them, don't move from house to house, remain in one house and get to know that local place if at all possible. Come to love that community, and figure out what is going on there through the power of the Holy Spirit, where that place is hurting, where it is not flourishing, not well, and what might the Church contribute, in partnership with, not in isolation from, the local community's gifts and resources.

I think this is a terrific template for ministry today in our weary communities, and I bet you'll see this template reflected in Pastor Pekich-Bundy's style of leadership if you are paying attention. Like the 70, under your pastors faithful leadership, you'll be invited to fall in love with Alma MI again, to foster a deep love for this place because Jesus loves this place, to have dinner with people, (when Covid precautions allow it), to talk to the school superintendents, the business leaders, the police people, the food pantry organizers, and we discern where oppression and injustice has a stronghold, and work with other like-minded locals, to cast it out. The church was never designed to operate alone, we got that wrong along the way when we thought we the Church could operate independently from others, as a silo, in a local community. We need local partners who share our mission of shalom, of a community where systems aren't in place to keep people poor, where women are equal to men, all skin colors are equal. That is the world God desires, and the work of the church in the local community is to keep pressing for it, even when it feels like the wolves are closing in, especially when it feels like that.

My mentor, who was active in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, said to me and it has shaped my life's work; the local pastor, together with the local congregation, is God's best plan for the healing of the world. Pastor Pekich-Bundy here in Alma, together with you all, is God's best plan for the healing of Alma. So, don't ever underestimate how important your work is. It's God's best plan.

Returning to the first question I posed at the beginning: which was the greater gift Jesus bestowed on the 70 disciples he sent out: the power to heal and cast out demons in the local community? Or the power to see and hear what needs casted out in the first place?

I believe that of the gifts Jesus gives his disciples, the greater may just be the power to see and hear what needs casted out in the first place. Because when that is in place among Jesus' disciples in a local place—when we work together with local leaders, when we members of the Church are deliberately in the community looking to see where God is at work and looking to see where Evil is at work, when we recall that God said it is not good for us to be alone, when we see our hope and welfare as inextricably linked to that of those around us, **then** the Church thru the power of the Holy Spirit can accomplish so much more than we possibly could alone, and perhaps, we discover that our names, along with those first disciples, are written in the book of heaven.

This call to grow deep and to commit deeply in one place/one community is the assignment that the body of Christ seems to have lost sight of somewhere along the way. Yet it was always the mission. We were always meant to perplex the world by our prioritization of people over progress, hearts over headway, quality over quantity.

So my hope for you, Alma Presbyterian Church and Alma College students, is to orient deeply in your local community of Alma to see and hear what is happening. Where are the places of great joy? Where are the places of great pain? Where are evil systems or evil oppression happening? Where do you delightfully encounter God? Do a ride-along with your local police officers and see what you learn about your community. Talk to the teachers, bake cookies and take to the teacher break room because our teachers are weary after 3 years of Covid. Any teachers/educators here today? Bless you. God

will sustain you in your work. Write to the CEO of your hospitals, or bring cookies to them too as they work to keep your community healthy in a global pandemic. Our teachers and hospital personnel are doing incredible work in the midst of the pandemic and a word of support from the Church may lead the holy spirit to open up conversation for how we move into the future in more life-sustaining ways in this pandemic. Listen to the stories of your community, and then discuss and pray with Pastor Pekich-Bundy and others, and see what the spirit prompts Alma College and Alma Presbyterian to do in faithful response.

Here is the Good News: You already have what you need for this work. Jesus makes clear, you don't need anything more. You don't need a bag, or different clothes, or more equipment. You have these three gifts which are all you need to do that which Jesus calls you in Alma:

- In baptism, you were given the gift of the Holy Spirit. The very same Spirit that filled Jesus and shaped his thinking, fills you and shapes your thinking and imagination to be the Church in this day. Stay deeply in tune with the Holy spirit within you. The world needs her influence and expression through you.
- And at the table of Holy Communion, every week, you are fed and sustained by the bread and wine of Christ, the body and blood of Jesus, to be that which this world needs—Jesus, to a broken and weary world.
- And in the pulpit of this Church, every week, you hear the Good News of Jesus proclaimed, words of hope to a weary world; words of truth to a confused world. Words of justice to an unjust world.

The local pastor, together with the local congregation, is God's best plan for the healing of this world. Alma College and Alma Presbyterian, you've called one of Indiana's finest pastors to be your leader. And together you are God's best plan for healing of Alma. I'm praying for you, with all the saints of the Church. Enjoy the ride! Amen.