



## *Texts in Context*

# Eating What Is Set before You (Luke 10:1-11, 16-20)

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**O**UR YOUTH GROUP RECENTLY TOOK A TWO-WEEK TRIP TO NICARAGUA. ON THE return flight, I happened to sit next to a medical student who was returning home after serving for two weeks as a medical missionary. When asked what kinds of things he had done, he replied, “Mostly giving out diagnoses and pills.” Then he added, “And of course, mentioning the spiritual aspects of things, to let people know about Jesus.”

Now his is the kind of trip that makes sense to the church in North America! You go from the rich, knowledgeable first world into the underdeveloped (or should we rather say over-exploited?) world to do something, to deliver the goods: to bring health care, build a house, dig a ditch, do something useful. Along the way, you might even mention the “spiritual aspect of things.” This is what a mission trip is all about. At least this was the expectation I encountered as we prepared over six months with fifteen high school youth and six adults to spend two weeks in Nicaragua. “Oh, you are going on a mission trip. What are you going to do, build something?” was the typical response to the news of our travel plans.

“No, we’re not going to build anything,” I would answer, somewhat sheepishly, at first, then more accurately, “We are going to learn about the life and faith of the people of Nicaragua.” Indeed, what we were actually preparing for was not a mission trip, but a “reverse-mission trip.” My experience in Nicaragua has always been that Jesus is alive and well, hanging out among the people of this impoverished, beautiful land. *The hope of the trip was to bring young people, who have all but given up finding vitality in the religion of their parents, to a place where the Spirit of God is so obviously astir.* There, perhaps they could practice seeing Jesus so that upon their return their eyesight might be improved. Never mind doing something. Anything we might do, the hard-working people of Nicaragua could do better and

faster. Our plan was to accompany, if only for a short time, people living in difficult times: to observe the devastation of poverty and the inspiration of the poor in the midst of that poverty. We visited a country that is living Good Friday, where hope is constantly and systematically laid to waste by powers and principalities, like corruption in government, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Yet the hope of the resurrection continues to be found among the people who work when they can, pray, organize, and maintain their dignity and faith. It is too early to tell how profoundly this Holy Week of a country has affected us, but it must be said that on Easter morning, having returned home, our youth were asked to tell about someone they had met on the trip whom they supposed “to be the gardener” (John 20:15), but who might have shown them the risen Jesus. Faces lit up, hands went up, and stories were told! This, from teenagers usually trying to steal a nap during the sermon!

### I. LAMBS AND WOLVES

Our experience of a reverse-missionary trip leads naturally to thinking about the mission texts assigned for Pentecost, and how we might read them in light of that experience. On the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, we encounter the story of the sending of the seventy. Two by two the followers of Jesus go forth to proclaim the reign of God. They are told to pray for other workers to enter the harvest, that they are going like sheep among wolves, that they are to carry no extras. In this first missionary adventure, Jesus sends his followers out two by two to all the places he was to visit. “I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves,” Jesus tells them. How are we to understand this? Is it that the disciples are sent out defenseless, without the aid of backup (no extra purse or bag), to be easy pickin’s for anyone who would take advantage? If so, it is odd that by the end of the pericope the disciples came back filled with rejoicing: “Even the demons are subject to us in your name” (Luke 10:17). Some lambs, huh?

Of course, Jesus does give them authority over the enemy. One may ask, however, how this authority comes to the disciples and whose demons are being overcome. My experience of missionary work has been the reverse of what one might expect from reading this text. For me, being sent has had less to do with how extraordinary the lambs might be and more to do with the wolves to whom they were sent.

In my former parish, for instance, I lived a stone’s throw from a low-income housing development known as Hearthside. There, the violence of poverty was concentrated in a two-block area: shootings, stabbings, turf wars over drug sales, and more. The gunfire was so frequent that my wife, who felt compelled to report all shots that she heard, was on a first-name basis with the 911 operators. If you want wolves, we had wolves.

So you can imagine my hesitation to enter that neighborhood as a “missionary.” For a year, I drove by the road into Hearthside without turning in. For a year,

I stood looking out my back window at that area and told God that I was not ready to go there. Finally, God decided I was ready and brought Hearthside to me. My own kids had been attending school with the children of Hearthside, and in that first summer after the school year, our backyard became the playground of choice for dozens of neighborhood kids. By the end of July, I had been invited by almost every child to come and meet their mom or dad or grandmother. So, I finally conceded and went, not two by two, but in the middle of an entourage of little children.

As I walked through the neighborhood that first time, I noticed the young men, hanging out, scowling, suspicious of this new face in the neighborhood. “Gangsters,” I called them to myself, but the little ones with whom I walked called them “my uncle,” “my brother,” “my cousin.” I entered people’s homes, met their surprised, sometimes suspicious families, heard stories, was invited back by a few warm souls. These were the first to accept the peace I extended. Such was my first “missionary” adventure into the neighborhood to which I would become pastor for the next eight years. There I would learn that I might look like “a lamb among wolves,” but you can’t be a lamb among wolves when the wolves don’t act like wolves but welcome you warmly into their homes and lives. Nor can you be a missionary to a people who know Jesus better than you do and who depend upon God’s grace every single hour of the day in the midst of desperate surroundings. What happened to me was the subjection of some of my own demons: fear, self-consciousness, racial and economic prejudice, and—not the least—my abstract, intellectual understanding of God. It took more than one trip, but I continue to rejoice over what happened in those years.

## II. WHAT IS SET BEFORE YOU

Luke 10 might be read as suggesting that the authority given the disciples is the power to enter into a village and “tell them what is what.” I would suggest, however, that the story invites us to find an authority, an authenticity, whose source is Christ, in the midst of those to whom we are sent, be they far or near. That invitation is found in the repetition of Jesus’ command to eat and drink what is provided for you (Luke 10:7-8).

It is curious that Jesus would repeat this admonition. The first time, one might say, “Yes, eat what they give you, don’t go around to the richest house with the best food.” But when the charge is repeated almost immediately, one has to pause and ponder. Here are the seventy going out to all the places that Jesus is to visit, neophytes to mission work, filled with great power to heal and to exorcize, and Jesus is concerned that the missionaries not spend time over the wine-list or order à la carte! What is so important about receiving table hospitality that the charge is made twice?

On our Nicaragua trip we went out two by two to stay with the *campesinos* who were our hosts. We encouraged our people, frightened that the food and wa-

ter would make them sick, to eat what was set before them because by doing so we were acknowledging the gift that our family was giving us. Indeed, every time we sat to eat rice and beans, we received not only the standard fare of most of Latin America but, more profoundly, also a steady diet of honor and humility. To be served rice and beans prepared over a stone oven fueled by wood in dirt-floor houses on the only little table in the house was an honor. To be told the stories of our host families' lives over the meal was an honor. To have the tiny house in which we were guests rearranged so that we might have a bedroom to ourselves was an honor. The tendency, of course, was to raise one objection or another, that what was set before us was not to our taste or, more typically among our group, that it was too much for a poor family to spend on rich North Americans. These objections were both true, perhaps, but for the sake of the gift and for the sake of learning to receive, it was important to eat what was set before us.

And when my host mother offered me coffee one morning and an egg with my rice and beans, it was truly humbling. Surely, nobody else in the family was eating eggs or drinking coffee, so I had to wonder, Is this the "wage" that the laborer deserves (10:7)? Not the cup of coffee or the egg, but humility in the presence of gracious hospitality? And is this not what we are in such desperate need to experience? We want so eagerly to do mission, to get on with it, to bring help to those in need, to preach good news to those who live without hope. But, as my Aunt Mary, the quintessential Italian grandmother, used to say when we would get up to leave from a visit, "What's a matta? You so busy you ain'ta gonna eata somethin'?"

How can you not accept that kind of invitation? Before we begin to proclaim or heal or build anything, we are told twice to be served by the folk we are intending to serve. For us, this might mean looking around in our congregations and communities to see how we are being fed. Where do we find strength and courage and grace infusing our life together?

Preachers, what are the people of God in your home place setting before you? Their hard work? Their years of wisdom? Their sorrows and joys? Their stories and their vulnerabilities? Perhaps they are even rearranging their homes and their hearts to receive you. You have noticed it. You have felt the calming peace of Christ when you have been invited into sacred moments in the life of someone in your congregation. You have fallen to your knees at the quiet faithfulness of the people to whom you preach. It is an overwhelming honor to be invited into the hearts of our people, to have them share their hopes and dreams, faith and doubts.

Our calling in the text is to proclaim the reign of God with as much power as possible, to heal the sick and cast out demons, and to announce boldly the nearness of God. But if we are to do so, it will be from the authority given to us as we encounter Jesus in the generosity of those to whom we proclaim. The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost would be a great time to proclaim that the reign of God is very near, as near as the grace we have received from the people for whom we preach.

For me, I could speak not only of the graciousness of Nicaraguan farmers but

of the graciousness of people to whom I minister, the apple growers of eastern Washington, who are also suffering under the same market forces as our Nicaraguan brothers and sisters. In their struggle they, too, have been gracious and have continued to set a table before the rest of the congregation by continuing to give of their (dwindling) treasure along with gifts of time and talent. In the face of having to pull trees and scramble for a living as they make transition to another way of life, the growers continue to work, to carry on, to grieve, and to look to God's future. My guess is that they have not had time to notice how inspiring they are. Perhaps they need the preacher to preach a reverse-missionary story to let them see how much they feed the souls of others, how much they give to one another and how, in them, I find hope and authority to continue to proclaim good news. It is a wonderful opportunity to build up the body of Christ, from which is received authority "over all the power of the enemy," power to subject demons (even our own), and authority to proclaim the nearness of God. ☩

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