



July 3, 2016 – “Fear Not, Love All” (1 John 4:18-21 and Luke 10:1-11, 17-20)

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“Fear Not, Love All.” We knew this was the theme of our Middle School Mission trip to Asheville, and we proudly wore it on our new t-shirts. We encountered the difficulty of “fear not” when the 8 of us walked into a room at Hind’s Feet Farm, a day program for adults with serious traumatic and acquired brain injuries. These injuries could have been caused by war, car accidents, genetics, illness or a slew of other life altering moments. We felt little fearful about what the next three hours would be like. Questions like, “what should we talk about with someone whose been in a car accident?,” “what should we not talk about with someone who can’t tie their own shoes?,” “what are we going to DO?” floated around. We sat down in a classroom with the director of the program, where she tried to set some expectations for us. Mostly, she was making us even more nervous. “Doug is non-verbal, so you can talk to him, but he won’t say anything back. Lexie is in a wheelchair, so be aware of that. Sam is brand new to the program, so he may not be ready to share.” We looked around. “So what are we going to do?”

When Jesus sends the 70 on a mission trip of their own, I’m sure they had some of the same concerns. “So you want us to go to a strange house in a strange town, and just ask for them to let us stay? And feed us? When is the part where we cast out the demons, Jesus? When do we cure the sick? What are we going to DO while we stay with strangers?”

Jesus empowers his followers to do the big E word-evangelism. Now I know this word strikes a lot of fear in the heart of many of us. We imagine rallies and tracts and shouting-but Jesus is talking about a different kind of evangelism than that-he’s talking about the kind of evangelism that’s all about relationship, and makes the givers and receivers equals. It’s a kind of evangelism that fears not, and loves all. Whether you’re going into Asheville, Samaria, or downtown Duluth to evangelize, on every good mission trip, you’ve got to first sit down and learn the rules. On our trip to Asheville these included:

- Remember who you are representing-yourself, your church, Presbyterians, and the church of Jesus Christ
- Don’t bring your cell phones to worksites or group events
- Share your snacks!
- Clean up after yourself
- Travel in groups of 3
- Be where you need to be on time.

Jesus’ sending of the 70 was no exception. His rules included:

- Go in pairs
- Don’t bring your purse, bag, or sandals
- Don’t stop to talk on the way-you’ve got places to be!
- Depend on the hospitality of strangers to house you
- Offer a peaceful presence
- Eat what you are given
- Don’t move from house to house.

Clearly, this is the first mission trip Jesus planned, and he must not have thought through the details because he won't let the disciples wear shoes, and he didn't provide them with candy or money for snacks. Next time he'll put together a better packing list. Candy aside though, the intent behind Jesus' rules for this mission trip are clear-Fear not, and make friends.

Fear not-you'll have somewhere to lay your head. Fear not-Packing light frees you up to do the task at hand. Fear not-Food will be provided, even if it's different than your usual dinner. Fear not-you aren't alone in this. Fear not-God is already near. When you come in peace, and when you start with relationship, fear is quickly erased by hospitable love.

It turns out that Jesus' style of evangelism has a lot to do with presence and conversation. As they enter a new home, his followers are instructed to say "Peace to this house!" But more than just words, if they follow Jesus' model of evangelism, their whole presence will embody the peace they are speaking into the room. Nothing about what they are bringing in or doing forces change-they are simply to spend time in the rhythm of the life of that household, building their relationships over meals, work and time.

Fear Not, Love All is a way of life that must be prepared for and practiced every day, in every encounter. At Hind's Feet Farm, as soon as we crossed the threshold, Vivienne, one of the participants with a brain injury greeted us at the door-"Hey y'all, I'm Vivienne-call me V. Tell me who you are and come sit down!" The love she extended to us almost instantly quieted our questions. After V's warm welcome, we sat down with our provided sack lunches, spread out between the program participants and started to eat. Sometimes when we sit down with strangers it's uncomfortable-quiet, awkward. But almost immediately, the hum of conversation filled the room as introductions were given, stories of the day were shared, and our group quickly realized that there was nothing to fear-we were with friends.

By depending on the hospitality of others for shelter, the disciples are blurring the boundaries between "us" and "them," decreasing their threat level as an outsider and becoming intimately aware of the lifestyle of those they are visiting. By bringing nothing, they have nothing in their back pocket to wave in someone's face and must rely on peace and hospitality of the strangers they encounter. By eating what is provided, they are sending the message that their relationships with the hosts are more important than laws about food. By moving on when rejected, they keep the peace they bring with them, and trust God to do the rest. By going in pairs, announcing God's nearness wherever they go, evangelism begins with relationship rather than a lone prophet announcing doom. Together, there is little to fear, and together, there is more love to be given.

After our meal together, program participants began to stand up and share the tragic and intimate stories of their lives. Car accidents, strokes, cancer, falls-our group listened with rapt attention. We gasped, laughed, cried, and absorbed the gift of these stories. At the end of their stories, each person offered our group a piece of advice. "Don't judge. You haven't walked in my shoes, and I haven't walked in yours." "Don't take anyone or anything for granted." "Everything can change in an instant." These weren't things we had never heard-but in the context of these personal life changing stories, they struck chords deep within each of us. Together, tie dyed t-shirts with our new friends, taking joy in rubber bands, choosing colors, and turning white into bright pink, green, purple and orange. We worked alongside the participants in their daily chores-vacuuming, window washing, table wiping. At the end of the afternoon we were invited to the group's daily reflection time, where we were all given space to reflect on our day together. One youth confessed her pre-judgment before walking in the room, and how that fear was transformed into love. A program participant thanked us for tie dying with us and reminded us again-"Don't judge anyone. You just don't know them." Basically-Fear not, Love All.

Through shared meals, conversation, and participation in the daily routines of our newest friends, peace was shared and God's love was spread-God's kingdom had come near.

God's kingdom is being announced near in the peace the 70 bring, the vulnerability they offer as they search for shelter and food, and the relationships they build along the way. Even when that peace is refused, hospitality denied, and conversation shut down, God's kingdom is being announced. There is much more happening here than the disciples know. They return with joy, after what sounds like a successful mission trip saying "Jesus, Jesus! Wow! What a great trip! In your name even the demons submit to us!" They are probably recounting incredible stories of the people they met, those in need that they helped, and all the crazy food they ate.

We did some of the same on our return. In Asheville, we were sent out to many different groups in the community by the Asheville Youth Mission-AYM. From low-income elementary schools to veteran's housing, from programs like Hind's Fee Farm to agencies helping those experiencing homelessness get housing, from camps for people with developmental disabilities to meeting locals around downtown Asheville, we were sent out. We posted pictures of our good work on facebook-Check this out Check this out! Trey tended this food, so people in need could eat. Paxton tilled a field, so more food could be grown. Sara helped weed whack and edge a community garden. Quinn and Grace cleared a trail so young children can learn and grow in the outdoors. Zeta found a dancing partner in Jimmy, a camper with a developmental disability. All this news is good-Jesus was pleased with the disciples, as I am so proud of our youth. But he tells us-"Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." What matters more than the number of people they reached, and the powers of heaven that they called upon to heal is their grace filled relationship with God-A relationship they are both receiving and expressing to others. What matters more than the number of hours we worked with AYM, the money we saved the non-profits we worked with, and the amount of people we affected is the love of God that we embodied in all we did.

Real evangelism is the embodiment of "Fear not, Love all." This kind of evangelism is not easy, but it is something we are all equipped to do. We have everything we need in the person who sends us, Jesus Christ. It is the expression of the passage we read from 1 John today, our theme verse for AYM, which teaches "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...we love because he [Jesus] first loved us." V embodied this for us when we walked in that room and received her welcoming love before we even sat down. The disciples were equipped with first hand knowledge of Jesus-they had seen his miracles, heard his teachings, and followed in his footsteps. We too have seen things that can only be God, heard the stories of Jesus's life and teachings, and strive to follow in his footsteps-which is what brought us to this place this morning. Fear not, love all is more than a catch phrase in practice-it is our grace filled relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ, spilling over onto every relationship in our lives. We get a chance to practice this today. In a few minutes we will be invited to the Lord's table to share in a meal. We are invited there today exactly because we are loved first. We are welcome there because we are the honored guests at our creator's banquet. We find peace there, because the peace of God has already been returned to us. Return to this table with joy in your hearts today, because the kingdom is near, and we are equipped to evangelize-in peace, in relationship, fearing not, and loving all.

Benediction: So be sent out by Christ today to go back into your homes, into your communities, and into this broken and hurting world, bringing nothing with you but the vulnerability of the disciples, peace of God, never wavering presence of the Spirit, and the vast love of Jesus Christ. Fear not, and love all.