

Pastor Roy's Sermon from July 3, 2016

July 4th is a holiday in which we as a nation may ask, "Who are we, where have we been and where are we headed?" We celebrate what we value. If we love the landscape, we celebrate the physical land in which we live and visit. If we love independence and the ability to choose, will celebrate democracy. If we love technology and scientific discovery, we will emphasize and be grateful for the educational opportunities we have in this country. And so on. . .

As a nation, we took shape when land owners and a few who were well traveled and read, began meeting and discussing new possibilities for government and nationhood. When they published the declaration of independence these leaders made clear that something new was happening. But no one knew exactly where these new possibilities might lead. There were no guarantees. Perhaps our identity as a nation is summed up best as a shared trust in goodness. Or, "In God we trust."

Go back 1800 years and Jesus is sending out 70 disciples two by two to proclaim by word and action that the Kingdom of God had come near—that a new present and a new future are right at hand. They are sent to minister. To represent Jesus. To invite people to embrace this Kingdom of God which comes close in Jesus, and in these 70 ministers, and then to the communities of faith which the disciples and apostles helped form. The disciples and crowds were learning that "Anyone who gets involved with Jesus gets involved with the kingdom of God (Jurgen Moltmann)." The Kingdom of God and Jesus are inseparable. Those who live in Jesus' name practice the kingdom of God.

So, like the disciples, we are doing the work of Jesus except unlike the 70, we don't usually go anywhere empty handed. Yet if we stop and think about it, faith is learning and accepting that we are, empty handed. We find ourselves grasping for outward assurances, but ultimately it's not the outward that matters--it's the inward. For is it not the inward presence of God that carries us forward? We think many thoughts, but we are not our thoughts. We do many things, we are not what we do. Not our thoughts nor our actions, but the presence of God within us, is what keeps us. God's presence holds us in times of quiet as well as times of confusion and loss.

We know God's presence together with sisters and brothers and in solitude. The inward life is the first work of God's Kingdom. We may receive this inward life, but we may not demand it or grasp it. It is a gift. And so, wherever we go, whatever we do, we are truly empty handed like the 70 whom Jesus sent. As was Jesus, truly empty handed. We are empty handed as we depend on the gifts of the great Giver, God. And the greatest gift which gives us strength is the presence of God.

And so we offer this very presence as we go. It is our message of peace. It is communion with God.

The founding fathers and mothers of our nation could not make the experiment of our nation work. They did what they did in faith that the people who came after them would continue the work they had begun, that this United States would meet new challenges and work together for good within and without borders, not perfectly, but faithfully, as best one might hope a nation of diverse folks might be.

So Jesus, and the apostles, and all the saints who have gone before us have passed the inward and outward work of the Kingdom to us. They experienced the merciful presence and peace of God, a presence and peace which knows no boundaries, no limits, no end. Herein lies our hope and our faith. Our hope and faith begins within and carries out to all whom we meet with the life giving message of the presence and mercy of God. Thanks be to God.