

“To Dust or Not to Dust”

Luke 10:1-20

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Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

The Gospel lesson is from Luke 10 – a story about Jesus sending out 70 of his followers, in pairs, as kind-of advance teams to towns that he will be coming to teach and preach in. There are lots of interesting, sometimes befuddling, details given. Some scholars think that the number 70 refers back Genesis - the 70 nations listed after the Flood in Genesis 11 – so this story from Luke symbolizes the good news going to the whole world. There is also reference to hospitality here – being welcomed into people’s homes or not – shaking the dust of your feet at people or not; some customs not as familiar to us. At the end of this reading, Jesus speaks of treading on snakes and scorpions – some have taken that literally, others have seen it as a reference to the Roman empire and political authorities.

And one other thing – the way the lectionary reading is listed, we’re supposed to skip vss. 12-15 right in the middle of this story, which are some particularly harsh words of “woe” from Jesus – but we’re not going to skip those. I think it’s important that we hear that part of the story too – see what you think:

Luke 10:1-20

I wonder if you can identify with, see yourself in, any part of that story from the Gospel of Luke? My guess, my prediction, is that if you pay attention to this story, there's NOT much of anything that most of us would particularly identify with – maybe not even much that you resonate with – and maybe even that you would distance yourself from, reject. Perhaps you think I'm being overly pessimistic or misjudging you – but let's go through it and see.

* Jesus sends out 70 followers – 35 pairs – preparing the way for Jesus in towns where he intended to visit. They are to go and offer a greeting of 'Peace' – to say 'the kingdom of God is near' – to heal the sick. Anything about your life that connects to that? Perhaps so, professionally or personally; or perhaps not. But either way the details get pretty specific in a way that makes it difficult for any of us to be able to connect with – traveling with nothing but the clothes on your back; staying in stranger's homes. Not our everyday – or anyday...

* and then there's the whole dust thing – depending on whether these advance teams of disciples are welcomed or not, the town it to receive either a blessing of peace or to get dust in their faces! If they are not welcomed, well then brush that town's dust right off

your feet; if they don't want the good news then you don't even want their dust. Have you considered it your calling lately either to bless a town with peace or to kick up dust in holy indignation?

Probably not

* and then there are the “woes” – the “woes” from Jesus that I made a point of including in the reading. The parting words that Jesus gives as these disciple duos set out, sound like a cloud of doom – Jesus assumes there will be rejection, and Jesus proclaims the judgment that will come down on those who do reject the news: “Woe to you” is the word from Jesus. How does that connect with, settle with you? Is that the language you listen for, listen to, from Jesus day to day – a message of “woe” for the world? Probably not so much...

* and then there's the joy – the disciple duos return with joy, which sounds cheery enough, but even that is actually quite intense and foreboding. These disciples are joyful because they can cast out demons in Jesus' name. And Jesus responds with a soliloquy about Satan falling from heaven and the disciples treading on snakes and

of conflicts with the enemy but the final promise of heaven. That's the joy part of the story! And you know what I'm going to ask: is this talk of casting out demons and dealing with the enemy part of your routine? I don't expect so.

OK – so that's my case for this passage having nothing to do with you! An itinerant preaching – dust shaking- woe cursing – demon casting – snake treading life...not your style, right!? But I don't want to be coy about things – I'm sure you expect that even though I've made a case for irrelevance with this passage, that I'm not going to end that way – that wouldn't be much of a sermon – and I would indeed like to find a way into this story that does connect with us. But I do think it's important first not to skip over the distance, the poor fit, of all this for us.

Because it's not just that these are things way back then that are not a part of our everyday as followers of Jesus now, it's that some of what is described here may touch on ways that we still do see faith, Christianity, expressed today, and that they are some of the very things about faith that we would not want to associate ourselves with. And I think that may be particularly true for the “dust” and the “woe” parts of this passage – the followers of Jesus being told to shake off dust as a protest, in righteous indignation; and Jesus' words of woe, judgment for those who do not receive the kingdom of God. That kind of approach has been practiced

a lot over the years by the Church and it isn't too hard to find it these days as well in the broader Church – Christians seeing it as their righteous role to condemn others – the Church seeing it as its job to play the role of judge over others. There are plenty of ways we are all aware of that the “dust” and “woe” parts of this passage would fit the actions of the Church over the years and right now just fine. Many of you have probably experienced something of that “dust” and “woe” approach from the Church as well. And here's something interesting, I think – if you're new here visiting today or you've been around Hope Church for just a little while...let me give you my take on things here at Hope Church – a lot of the folks around here are here to some degree because the “dust” and “woe” approach is not the main vibe here (...I would count myself among those people!) You could say that Hope Church is a ‘recovering church’ location for people who have been damaged or disillusioned by too much “dust” and “woe” in their faith experience, people who have found meaning in being a follower of Jesus in a way that does not need to start with judgment and righteous indignation. That's my take on things ...”dust” and “woe” has been an approach to faith all too familiar for many of us. “Dust” and “woe” – do you like that shorthand for a judgmental approach? We could say: “dust” and “woe” is not the way to go... (a catchy little phrase you can use) 😊.

So here's the thing – in this passage that is difficult to connect with, but with the judgment part being all too familiar...it is precisely at that “dust” and “woe” part that I think we DO need to connect - that we need to connect there because even though it has been mis-used, it still has something important to say to us, to offer us, to challenge us with – something life-giving in it, even, to offer others. I want to reclaim “dust” and “woe” with you as part of who we are as followers of Jesus Christ – and you can see how that goes.

As a way into that, I'd like to bring up the Belhar Confession – many of you know that as of this June the Belhar Confession is now an official Standard of the Reformed Church; it came from our sisters and brothers in South Africa out of the context of resisting apartheid; it is a confession about Unity, Reconciliation & Justice, and it is a profound and powerful gift for our denomination. I think you could also say that the Belhar is an expression of “dust” and “woe” – in South Africa part of what happened is that Christians who knew apartheid was wrong at some point had to confront those who held on to apartheid – those opposing apartheid had to shake some dust in protest and say we cannot stay with you...you are missing out on the reign of God. And the Belhar Confession itself is then something of an expression of “woe”; it expresses the dire consequences there are when unity, reconciliation and justice are ignored. The “dust” and “woe” that I see in the context of the Belhar are a witness to the vital issues that are at stake in life –

“dust” and “woe” are an expression of the life-giving ways of God in the midst of the deadly ways of the world.

I haven't had to deal with apartheid as part of a system of oppression against me – I have not had to deal with injustice against me as the primary reality of my daily life. Which makes me realize that there can be for me the luxury of being able to avoid dealing with “dust” and “woe” in my life of faith – I'm OK, so I don't need to stir up problems with others. But the kingdom of God given in Jesus Christ isn't about just me being OK – it is about wholeness for all – and I am called to speak for justice for others as well. We can start to realize, to reframe what “dust” and “woe” can be about – not about self-righteousness and disdain, but about a voice of justice, of life, of hope – a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves – a voice for creation under attack – a voice against the powers of violence. There is in fact a lot to say “woe” to in our world as followers of Jesus Christ – to speak the truth that the ways of division and violence are dead-ends that lead only to brokenness and destruction.

Many of us may have experienced the misuse of “dust” and “woe” in the realm of faith – used as a way of fear or warped control; a way of intolerance and self-righteousness; but part of the gift of knowing Jesus is to have even “dust” and “woe” redeemed as well. Certainly in our time, our context, we need to reframe things – since the church has misused “dust” and “woe”, we need to have a sense

of humility in how we speak – and we must speak “woe” not only to others, but also confess our own shortcomings – our own need for repentance and faithfulness.

And yet there is still a place and need for “dust” and “woe” – we do find ourselves connected back to this story with so few connections. We are indeed sent out by Jesus, an advance team for the Spirit of Christ...we carry with us good news...there is a blessing of peace to offer – a word of the reign of God that is a blessing for this world. And then we can see “dust” and “woe” not as our self-satisfaction of condemning others – but done out of conviction and integrity and even compassion – conviction to be a voice of justice for those who can’t speak; integrity to live our lives faithfully; compassion that longs for all to share in the blessing of God.

When we realize that “dust” and “woe” are from the heart of Jesus who loves and is life for the world, we can start to see our own calling in this story: a voice of justice in the face of some pretty messed up things in this world; a call to faithfulness to live as God intends; a challenge to others and ourselves to truly be about the blessing of Peace...things the world needs and would even respect from the Church...pretty relevant stuff, “dust” and “woe” – thanks be to God. AMEN.