

## “The Audacity of Hope”

“Am I able to do this?” When they left to do it all they had was hope, but not a groundless hope. The one who sent them—Jesus—believed they could do it and gave them encouragement in the doing. It is like Jesus said to them, “I know you can, I know you can.” So they trusted Jesus, and that trust gave substance to their hope.

These past weeks we have been exploring the challenges before the church. Times have changed but the call of Jesus remains the same. Help people learn that the kingdom of God is near to them. Help people see that, appreciate that, in the healing ministry we can have: where needs are met, where peace is brought to turmoil, where reconciliation is brought to division, where evil is met by good, where indifference is countered by kindness. We are the signs—the evidence—that the kingdom of God is indeed near. But it is so easy to hesitate. We can wonder if it is too much pull for us?

Chapter 13 of Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth is best known for its great definition of love. But there is an equally great nugget tucked into that chapter that concentrates these reflections into one pure diamond. Paul writes, “now...” by which he means “for this time we live in.” “Now (for this time) these three things remain: faith, hope and love.” The word faith here means trust. For this time, trust is central. Trust God. Hear our calling to go out into the town and trust God to help us live it, fulfill it. For this time, hope is central. Having faith that God is trustworthy creates and sustains hope...hope that what we desire can happen. (“I think I can, I think I can”). For this time, because we hope, go and love others. Heal. Bring kindness. Be peacemakers, agents of God’s grace. Be signs that the kingdom of God is near. Believe you can make a difference because we trust in God’s help, and that gives us hope.

What the story of the 72 tells us is that God sends us into our world for God’s good pleasure, and when we go and do, it brings Jesus joy. And joy for ourselves, for our trust will be proven worthy, our hope more assured and our acts of love more confident. Joy indeed!

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I am sure it must have been an anxious moment to those listening to Jesus that day. I mean, being a follower of Jesus had to be pretty inspiring, very exciting! If we use Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry, the followers would already have seen Jesus calm the storm, feed the 5,000, healings, heard Jesus’ teachings (including the sermon on the mount). The apostle Peter was already convinced that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. I think those who followed Jesus rose from their bed every day and wondered, “So what is going to happen today?”

And what happened this day? Jesus told them, what you have been watching me do I am now going to send you out to do. Now it is your turn. “What? Me?!? Do what you do?!?” It must have been an anxious moment for sure. And Jesus made it clear: what I am asking you to do will not be easy. Jesus said, “Do not take a purse.” You are not going to have any money to rely on. Jesus said, “Don’t take a bag or sandals.” In other words, don’t take any of your stuff to rely on. But that’s OK, Jesus said, you will find people who will give you food and shelter. All you will have is your partner—that’s it. Not only that, Jesus said, it won’t be easy. “I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.” But you will be accepted in some towns. If you are, heal the sick, and tell them that God’s kingdom is near them. That is helpful, comforting, hopeful. If you are not well received, but rebuffed, Jesus told them brush the dust of that town off your feet and move on. Move on to those who are receptive. “It is now time for the harvest, and the harvest is plentiful.” This recalls the Parable of the Sower, doesn’t it? Jesus is the sower, and in his teaching and healing ministry he was sowing seed of what the Kingdom of God was like, calling people to follow him. So now Jesus was sending these 72 followers to help people see the reality of God’s kingdom in their midst, to hear the good news that Jesus was pointing people to a new life in abundance, sending these 72 to invite others to join them as disciples of Jesus, to be living illustrations that the Kingdom of God was indeed near!

I suspect that more than a few people wondered whether they were up for the challenge or not. Am I able to do this? Sounds impossible. Sure, Jesus can do it because Jesus is probably the Messiah! But me?

I think the same assessment, the same feelings weigh upon many in the Canadian church today. Here we are—the people of God—and we are sent to this town, this city. And our city, like all Canadian places, appear less and less inclined to receive the message we have. It's not like we are sent to wolves; what we meet is growing indifference. The church can easily fall into a trap psychologists call learned helplessness: a belief that we just can't do what we desire to do. A belief that we aren't able. In 1900 there was a church school curriculum called Wellspring. That year they published a story entitled "Thinking One Can". Today we know it as The Little Engine That Could. [yes, it started as a story for Sunday School]. You know the story. There is a big line of boxcars to be pulled up a long, steep hill. The locomotive engines looked at the hill, looked at the load, and said, "that's too much pull for me." We can't do it. We can feel like the locomotives. We can look at the mission Jesus has given us and the hump in front of us and say the very same thing. It can feel hopeless.

But that day with Jesus, those 72 followers apparently didn't feel helpless. After all: they actually went out and did what Jesus asked them to do. Jesus made it clear: this was going to be challenging....but not hopeless. In his directives we hear his several points of actual encouragement. Yes, there will be some towns that aren't receptive, *but some towns will be*. Yes, there will be people who won't want to help you, *but some people will give you food and shelter*. I am sending you like lambs among wolves, but I am not sending you alone. You will have a partner for support, for encouragement. And laying under all this is a presumption. Would Jesus ask them to do it if it actually was hopeless? Not likely. After all, this was not just Jesus directing his followers to go out in mission. This was a short term assignment. And it looks like it was an assignment that was intended more for the impact it would have on the 72 rather than on the people in the towns they would be visiting. People learn a belief that they are helpless from negative life experience. Jesus, in this short term mission, was sending them out to learn from experience that they weren't helpless, to learn that they were capable of doing what Jesus asks us to do. For the 72, he directed them to go into towns, heal the sick, and encourage and comfort people with the message that God's kingdom is near you. And we read that the 72 returned from this challenging mission filled with joy! Joy because some towns indeed did receive them...some people did help them...some people were healed and some accepted their teaching! Joy, because they learned they were able. And as the story ends we hear that this success among the 72 even filled Jesus with joy. The plan worked! These followers now had greater confidence in what they could do, themselves, in pursuing Christ's mission. They were not helpless. They now had stronger hope. They left on the challenge, buoyed up by Jesus' encouragement, saying

to themselves "I think I can, I think I can." And like the little Tank Engine they returned affirming "I thought I could, I thought I could." The story ends with Jesus joyfully in prayer with the Father. "You have revealed these things to your children, for your own good pleasure." And I am sure it is pleasing to God every time the people of God step out hesitantly in hope in response to God's calling, and comes back with greater hope because there has been some success.

How can we do the same, in the challenges we face in our personal lives, in the challenge we have as a church in Canada today? Let's take an analogy. In the backyard at my home in London Ontario we had a big, old Locust tree. Beautiful. But when they reach a certain age, limbs begin to die and they require some serious trimming annually. The first year the project was a high-in-the-air limb. To reach it I had to climb up on a ladder, get on one limb then slowly make my way out along the limb, further and further from the tree trunk. Now, I am not the smallest of people and I did not know if the limb I was going to stand on would bear my weight. Stepping out on the limb—doing this new thing for me—was risky! Would I succeed or fail and fall? **Risk** always accompanies new ventures (like going off into the towns of Judea to preach and heal). But I had **hope** that the limb would hold me, and that hope was encouraged by my **trust** in the limb. The limb I wanted to stand on looked healthy, looked strong—it looked like I could trust it. And **because it seemed trustworthy I had hope** it would hold my weight. It was not a certainty—there was no guarantee—so all I had was hope. So I climbed onto the limb and slowly moved further and further out along it. And the limb proved trustworthy! It held my weight. **I became confident** in the strength of the limb and that **confidence strengthened my hope**. I was able to cut down the limb that needed to be removed. The following year I had to go back up into the tree and take care of a different dying limb. The second year it didn't feel as risky. The limb I stood on had proven trustworthy before so I was confident that it would still be trust worthy. The second year I had a more confident hope than the first. And that more confident hope helped me take the risk of going even further out onto the limb I had to stand on.

Do you see how these great words of our faith connect? Doing something new is inherently risky, but we can accept the risk and act if we have hope. Hope that we can attain what we aspire to. But for hope to exist there must be reason to hope...and we must trust that reason. The 72 followers of Jesus were being asked to do something risky—go out, two-by-two—and do what Jesus does. Heal people (!), comfort and encourage people with the word that the kingdom of God is near you. Increase the number of followers of Jesus. Risky. They could fail. Townsfolk might stone them. Many of the 72 would have asked themselves,