

PEACE TO YOUR HOUSE. GOD'S KINGDOM IS NEAR.

Happy July to you all!

Last week in my Children's Message I talked about how this is the time of year when a lot of people take vacations. Many people have a vacation planned for this summer. And even if they're retired, they might be planning to go somewhere special in the next month or two, before autumn comes and the chilly weather returns.

If you're going to take off on a special trip, there has to be some advance planning. Reservations need to be made. Tickets need to be purchased. If you're going to drive to your destination, the car should be checked over by a mechanic to make sure it's in good operating condition before taking it on a long road trip.

But we're not done yet. Suitcases need to be packed. Necessities like sunscreen and beach towels need to be gathered or purchased. Arrangements have to be made to take care of the family dog or cat or hamster or goldfish. Mail and newspaper delivery has to be temporarily stopped. Money has to be withdrawn from the bank account to pay for your travels. And on and on and on. Sometimes preparation for a vacation can be so involved and unending, it makes you wonder if it's worth going away at all.

I wonder what it would be like to take a vacation with Jesus. How would our Lord prepare for a recreational trip? What instructions would he give? Would it be as skimpy as the directives he gave to the seventy followers he sent out in pairs to proclaim the Gospel in the various surrounding towns and villages? He said to those followers, "I'm sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag and no sandals. Greet no one on the road. . . . Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide. . . . Do not move about from house to house."

Listening to those instructions, I'll be honest. I'm not sure I'd want Jesus to be my trip advisor on my next vacation. I imagine him being like, "Okay, listen up! We're taking off now and going to Disney World. Don't take your wallets, a suitcase or any shoes. And we won't need to make reservations. We'll just worry about hotel accommodations once we get there; I'm sure there will be vacancies available somewhere nearby.

"When we go into the Magic Kingdom, find a ride or attraction you like and stay there. Don't say hello to others waiting in line with you. Don't go wandering

all over the place. And only eat or drink what Mickey and Goofy offer you. I'm sending you out like Snow White in the midst of the evil queen, but don't be concerned. Everything is in God's hands."

It seems that Jesus wasn't a details person. It was the wider picture that he tended to look at. "Go out there and win one for God! No, really. I mean go out there right now! Don't overthink it. No planning and resources are necessary, because they're just distractions that will get in the way. It's all under control. You're going to do just fine. God is driving the RV."

Actually, if you listen carefully to the story, you'll notice that Jesus didn't leave those seventy followers completely empty-handed. He gave them something to take with them on their mission. It might not seem like much, but Jesus gave them words to say to the town's people they encountered. The first words Jesus gave were, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house.'"

"Peace to this house." Keep in mind, the peace they would be offering wasn't their own, but God's. The blessing they were to proclaim, Jesus said, was for God's peace to come to the house they were entering.

You know, I've had numerous pairs of Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons knock on my door over the years. And depending on what I was doing or what state of dress I was in, I occasionally opened the door and greeted them. I never let them in, mind you, but I said hello and was friendly to them. But thinking back on those visitors, none of them, before they offered their religious literature to me, ever said, "Peace to this house." God's peace be upon this house.

You know what? That would have made a pretty powerful impression on me. And it may well have moved me to actually listen to what they had to say for more than my customary eight seconds or so. "May peace—God's peace—come to this house." Or, if the person being addressed isn't in a house at the time, you could say, "Peace—God's peace—be with you." When said with sincerity and kindness, those are wonderful, gracious words for Christians to greet others with.

But, let's say such a greeting makes the person we're speaking to a little uncomfortable? What if the one we're addressing doesn't want to hear about or receive God's peace? What if they reject our greeting because they think we're some kind of religious fanatic, or they just don't have time to stop and listen to us?

Okay, that's a possibility. So this is what Jesus said would happen if we got such a rejection: "If anyone is there (in that house) who shares in peace, then your peace—God's peace—will rest on that person. But if they don't, it will return to you."

You see? With Jesus, there's no such thing as a wasted blessing. If you offer the blessing of God's peace to someone or to someone's house and they reject it, scoff at it, crumple it up and throw it in the garbage, you're going to get that blessing right back! It will bounce off that person like a beach ball and return to rest on you. That's what our Lord said. And if our Lord said it, we can believe it!

At its most basic, Jesus sends out his followers to proclaim the blessing of God's peace. And boy, the world could surely use such a blessing. To this weary old planet earth, and to our beloved country that just celebrated its 243rd birthday in the midst of the threats of climate change, random shootings in schools, places of worship and businesses, prejudice and injustice toward minorities, immigrants and asylum seekers, political partisanship, and severe social and cultural division, we're called by Christ to announce God's peace.

Why? Because announcing God's peace lets those we encounter know that God's deepest desire is for our well-being and healing. Speaking peace declares God's "yes" to human life. Speaking peace proclaims God's loving intention to mend our brokenness, to comfort us in our distress, and to lead us out of the darkness and into God's divine light. So yes, by all means, let us announce a blessing for all those we encounter to hear: "Peace to this house." God's peace be upon you.

That's the first word Jesus gave his followers to take with them and say on their journey to proclaim the Gospel. The second word Jesus gave them was, "The Kingdom of God has come near to you." Jesus said, "Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, say, 'The Kingdom of God has come near to you.' But what if you enter a town and they don't welcome you? Then what? Well, I have good news for you. The Kingdom of God has still come near. God's realm comes near no matter if we and our message are accepted or rejected.

If we're welcomed: "The Kingdom of God has come near."

If we're shunned: "The Kingdom of God has come near."

If we're liked: "The Kingdom of God has come near."

If we're disliked: "The Kingdom of God has come near."

If they roll out the red carpet for us and flower petals are tossed at our feet: "The Kingdom of God has come near."

If stones are thrown at us: "The Kingdom of God has come near."

A few minutes from now, we will be celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion. When you reach out your hands to receive the sacred gift of the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation, Christ himself will be present as the true host of that meal, and will say, "Peace to your house. Peace be with you. The

Kingdom of God has come near.” And after the supper is finished and we have heard Christ’s announcement that God’s Kingdom is near, then, like the seventy followers Jesus sent out before us, we’re also called to go forth, even if we feel like lambs in the midst of wolves, and share that proclamation with those we encounter.

We’re to offer the blessing of God’s peace to others, and allow it to either rest on them or return to us. We’re to proclaim the Good News that God’s rule, God’s Dominion, is near. We’re to let people know God’s Kingdom is close enough to touch, and to make it tangible and real by ministering to others in Jesus’ name.

Whenever and wherever we feed the hungry, give the thirsty a cup of water, care for the sick and welcome the stranger on behalf of Jesus, we are saying through our actions, through our caring and compassion, “Peace to your house. The Kingdom of God has come near you.”

God’s peace also comes to our house and God’s Kingdom draws near to us in our worshipping and our praying; in our baptisms and services of Holy Communion; when we love our neighbor; when we’re merciful and forgive others who have wronged us because God has forgiven us; and when we love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

So, my friends, if Christ isn’t speaking loud enough for you to hear the good news; or if your ears are closed to the blessing of peace he is offering, let me say those words to you now, on Christ’s behalf. “Peace to your house. Peace be with you. The Kingdom of God has come near.” Thanks be to God. Amen.