

Mission to Sheila

This sermon was preached at Sts. Peter and Paul Lutheran Church in Riverside, Illinois, on July 3, 2016, the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost and the weekend of the Fourth of July. The texts were Galatians 6:7-16 and Luke 10:1-20.

Lord of all the worlds, guide this nation by your Spirit to go forward in justice and freedom. Give to all our people the blessings of well-being and harmony, but above all things give us faith in you, that our nation may bring glory to your name and blessings to all peoples, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

For months I hadn't seen very much of him. On this particular day, the young man seemed more relaxed, much happier than I had remembered, even eager to have a conversation.

"I got a new job," he announced. "I really like it."

I congratulated him and told him how glad I was to see him. Then I said, "Remember that Bible I promised you? I've had it in my Caravan for about six months now. How 'bout I give it to you this evening."

"I got three of 'em now," he told me. "I even got one that's an Army Bible. I haven't read any of 'em, but people keep on giving 'em to me."

I admitted that it's difficult to know where to start reading the Bible because it's so vast, really more like a library under one cover rather than a book.

"By the way," he said, "I don't think I've told you; I've decided to start my own religion."

"Facebook?" I reluctantly asked.

"No, Instagram," he replied, "It works better."

"How many followers you got?"

"About a hundred fifteen."

"That's pretty good," I confessed, "you're doing a whole lot better than me on a Sunday morning. I hope you're giving 'em a good message."

"Mostly pictures," he said, "I'm calling it 'Sanity.'"

"What's that?"

"My new religion. I'm calling it 'Sanity.'"

I hesitated for a moment, then muttered something under my breath like, "Yea, we sure could use some sanity around here."

"Well, good luck," I wished him. "Just be careful. Don't forget what they did to Jesus, and he wasn't even trying to start a new religion. Now, let me give you that Bible. Maybe you don't have to start from scratch."

Many are not aware that most of the Bible, in its historical contexts, addresses people who were exiles, people who were continually being displaced from their

homelands, and not just their geographic homelands. Today it seems that the nation is again a land of exiles, not simply a place for people uprooted from their native lands, as has been the case for most of the country's history, but a people disoriented—even displaced—from the homeland of common values for the common good with a common destiny. We are exiles who, this day, are hurtling rapidly toward the cataracts of societal insanity, as my young friend inferred with the name of his new religion, swiftly carried along by the flood waters without anchor.

Over thirty years ago, several prominent sociologists collected their research into a volume entitled *Habits of the Heart* in which they coined the word "Sheilaism". As typical of many people, both then and now, the researchers quoted a young nurse whom they had named "Sheila Larson."

Sheila said, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way [though]," she said. "[I call my faith] "Sheilaism" ...just my own little voice. It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. And, you know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other."

"Sheilaism," the authors concluded, "is a shorthand term for an individual's system of religious belief that uses strands of multiple religions chosen by the individual usually without much theological consideration." Similar to the young man's "Sanity," "Sheilaism" is always a new religion, exclusively framed by and for the individual. To be honest, I think many of us here this morning are quasi-believers in "Sheilaism," or "Sanity," or name it whatever you want. Displaced, disoriented and drowning as we are in the flood waters, we'll reach for just about any stick or stone to keep ourselves afloat.

I can remember more than one parishioner who quit coming to church because, as they said, "I don't need all that anymore," implying, in my mind, that "I don't need you anymore either, Pastor, if I ever did." This is heart-breaking.

Today, Jesus cautions us to expect resistance, even abject loneliness, even rejection and persecution: "See, I'm sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves" (Luke 10:3). This remains true. More Christians around the globe today are being persecuted for their faith, more than at any other period in human history. For us in the U.S., it is not a physical sort of persecution as in other lands where Christians are imprisoned and even martyred for the faith. Ours is a kind of psychic persecution inflicted through a pervasive attitude of indifference toward the faith—the attitude of an increasingly secularized society together with what is mostly an absentee church. Again, the taunt goes something like this: "I don't need church. I don't need any religion. I don't need you. I've got other things to do. I can figure it out for myself."

Years ago, I learned in a sociology class that the harshest form of punishment that a community or family can inflict upon one of its own is *ostracism*, the act of deliberately ignoring a person's existence. Ostracism is far more painful than "defriending" someone on Facebook. No eye contact. No conversation. Not even a nod of the head to

acknowledge that the individual is present. I've had it happen occasionally when I have returned to my hometown—some people perceiving, no doubt, that I had deserted them and their ways in exchange for the big monstrous city. For them, I no longer exist. I denied them when I moved away.

“But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you’” (Luke 10:11).

“Behold, I'm sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3).

This is our mission field, dear friends, a mission field which has become unanchored from its moorings in traditional social institutions and shared cultural values that once provided people some sense of self-respect, self-worth, and honor, even when there was hardship. There was a time, not so long ago, when people could say, “So what, I don't make a lot of money. People can count on me. I'm loyal. I'm hard-working, and what's more, I belong to a good community.”

“I belong...,” but we don't belong, and we don't seem to be very interested in belonging to anything. So, where, I ask, do we locate our identity if we refuse to belong? This is not a generation of joiners, to say the least. A long time ago, I stopped using words like “join” and “member” as these words relate to being part of a congregation. I saw too often that the words would send people reeling in fear that I might ask them to do something without being paid.

Dear missionaries, here is the mission field, not in some distant land, but right here in our own congregation which is mostly absent every Sunday, located in a nation insane with consumption, and celebrity culture, and reality-TV fantasies, convincing them that success happens with a quick flash of publicity rather than the steady hard work of one's hands or one's mind. When people feel that their world is vanishing, as many people who work with their hands feel these days, they become easy prey for wolves.

Here again today is our little congregation, mostly deserted these weeks, not even seventy of us to be sent from worship. Here we are with our piecemeal efforts, often derided by ourselves and others for being so pitifully small and inept compared to the massive mega-churches. It's nothing new. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.”

Even the seventy “returned with joy.” Despite all the obstacles in the way of their mission, despite their feelings of being so insufficient to the task of “treading on snakes and scorpions,” God had actually done something with them, and so, there was rejoicing. Maybe Jesus sees something we don't see. In these ordinary, everyday, little lives “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.”

“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith” (Galatians 6:10).