

Sermon: Battle Plan
Text: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
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Context: WWPC
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After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.

Luke 10:1

Imagine that you are George Washington. It's July 1775. You've just assumed command of the Continental Army.

It will be another year before the colonies, whose freedom and sovereignty you've been charged to win, declare their independence.

And another eight years before your ongoing efforts to defeat the British finally succeed. And still another six years after that before you are elected president of the band new country your political savvy and tactical brilliance helped make possible.

For now you've been given an impossible task. There is no America yet, no state, no government. So there is no standing army and no draft. You are to command a fighting-force that consists entirely of conscripts and volunteers.

Which is to say, you're charged with the responsibility of leading a band of untrained, ill-equipped amateurs against an army comprised of well-equipped, highly-trained and well-disciplined professional soldiers--arguably the most formidable army on earth.

Not surprisingly, in the early stages you suffer a series of brutal defeats. Your troops are diminished through losses on the battlefield and through constant desertion.

Winter approaches. Your prospects look bleak. Your men are tired and hungry. They are already demoralized -- you are demoralized -- and soon they will be very, very cold. You call a mass retreat to a relatively safe staging area: Valley Forge.

And there you launch a plan that will change everything.

You finally have the time and opportunity to train your men. Despite the fierce cold, you will teach them the tactical skills and instill in them the discipline that are the hallmarks of a professional army, skills and discipline that will be essential if you are to have any hope of achieving your ultimate goal of defeating your distant overlords.

And it works. There will be more losses in the years to come, and other factors will play a part, but in the end, you will eventually win. The plan you've launched, the skills and discipline you've instilled in your men, make a critical difference and so your plan succeeds.

It would literally be heresy to compare George Washington to Jesus -- though I suspect it's been done -- but there are more than a few similarities between the circumstances in which they found themselves.

He is charged, is Jesus, with an impossible task: to usher in the reign of God on earth. To do this he recruits a small band of conscripts. Twelve to be exact. His tiny army consists entirely of untrained, unskilled amateurs. Their only weapon, really, is a kind of revolutionary love.

Meanwhile they are meant to mount this love-based insurgency in a context in which the status quo is protected and maintained not only by a professional army but by the most formidable army on earth.

But Jesus has a plan. First he enlists a few more troops until the ranks of his little army swells to just over eighty men total---the original twelve and now seventy fresh recruits-- along with any number of uncounted women, too, I suspect.

Then he sends them out, like lambs in the midst of wolves, on their first major mission. They're to go out in pairs, equipped with, well, basically nothing: no shields, no swords, no boots, no helmets, no purse and no bursar to make sure the cost of their food and supplies is covered.

Not even a spare pair of sandals. Just the shoes their feet, the cloaks on their backs, his love in their hearts, and a commitment to making peace everywhere they go.

That was his plan.

As most of you know I spent this past week in South Dakota. The latter part of the week I spent attending my “plenty-ith” high school reunion. But the early part of the week my plan was to visit the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

Following some heavy flooding there this spring, and with Session’s blessing, I hoped to do an assessment of the conditions there, to see if it would still be appropriate for us to take a group from here on a service trip out there this fall.

But first I had a visit to make. Floyd “Looks for Buffalo” Hand was our original host when I made my first trip to the reservation in 2008 with a group of WW students. Uncle Floyd, as we call him, is a highly respected tribal elder. He also happens to be a veteran, having served three tours of duty in the US military.

But he has diabetes and it has taken a heavy toll on him. For medical reasons, and to his great frustration, as you might imagine, he is now a resident of the state Veterans’ Home on the edge of Hot Springs, a small town some sixty miles from his home on Pine Ridge.

I wanted to bring him something, a small gift, maybe some buffalo jerky, I thought. I asked his wife, Natalie, about this and she indicated that the jerky would be hard for Floyd to chew. She suggested I bring him a pie instead--provided it was sugarless.

I called ahead to a bakery in Hot Springs, and ordered a sugarless blueberry pie.

When I walked in to pick it up the next morning I felt like I was in the middle of a staging area for a Make America Great Rally. The bakery also served breakfast and it seemed like every person at every table was wearing a patriotic t-shirt, or a hat proclaiming America First, or sporting a tattoo of a bald eagle on their forearm.

It must be said that, on one level, this is normal. The Black Hills is naturally a very patriotic area, given the presence of Mt. Rushmore in the heart of the Hills. And it was July 2nd, after all, so folks were gearing up to celebrate America’s birthday.

But for reasons I can’t specifically name, something also felt different from how I remember it, from the way patriotism was expressed and practiced was when I was a kid growing up in the area.

Maybe it was just my assumption -- and it was just that: an assumption -- that most folks in that room get their news from a particular source, one that has slowly but steadily persuaded these good folks to believe that the best way to make America great again is to make America white again.

I could easily be wrong about all of that, and I hope I am.

But as I paid for my pie, I had to resist the impulse to point out to the cashier, in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, that my plan was to take this pie to a respected tribal elder from Pine Ridge, a man who speaks Lakota fluently, who in fact prefers his native language to English, the language of the people who first invaded, and then stole, most of his homeland.

And unlike the man who ordered the tanks and fighter jets to be part of this year's Fourth of July celebration in our nation's capital (breaking with tradition yet again), this man was a veteran of the US Armed services.

And despite everything the dominant culture has done, and continues to do to his people, he fought to make America great. He fought to keep America safe.

But I did not go to South Dakota to pick political fights, and my own commitment is to make America kind again. Plus, were she still alive, my sweet mother would have throttled me if she found out that I had been so rude, and so pointlessly and deliberately provocative, in public.

So instead I quietly paid for the pie and thanked the nice lady who baked it for me on special order.

And then I went to visit Uncle Floyd. We sat and talked for a long time. He started out by telling me a story from the book of Joshua in the Old Testament, and quickly moved on to telling me that he believes Jesus is a Star Man -- by which I think he meant that in his view Jesus is a cosmic, universal figure. And he pointed out that the way of Jesus is essentially the way of the Lakota.

And then we broke bread together -- or in our case we had pie together, blueberry pie, so fresh it was still slightly warm from the oven.

And then something happened I did not expect.

A man who has every reason to harbor lasting grievances against people who look like me, a man who has every right to harbor bitterness against the religion I represent, a religion that has done great harm to his people, particularly to the children of his tribe, a man who has every right to remain deeply suspicious of the institutional church I serve, this same man asked me to pray for him.

Apart from the pie, I didn't plan for any of that to happen. It was all just a function of grace and the presence of the Great Spirit. But by the end of our time together it struck me that the whole scene could have been a training video for what the Realm of God looks like.

And it helped shed light for me on the core truth of this passage--a truth that I find both remarkable and surprising.

Jesus does not send his little army out, two by two, to change the world. He sends them out to break bread and to have conversations.

Don't linger in hopeless places. Don't shout at unsuspecting people when they're having breakfast in the local bakery. Instead speak peace when you enter a place. And don't think too highly of yourself: the realm of God will come near whether you're accepted or rejected. Because it's arrival does not depend on you.

That is his plan. Jesus's entire love-based insurgency depends on ordinary, ill-equipped, untrained people just like us. All we need to do is to be willing to have a piece of pie with people who don't look like us or think like us or share our beliefs. And then sit back and watch what happens.

It's so simple it's absolutely astonishing. But here's the most astonishing thing of all. It worked.

We know this is true because, two-thousand years after launching this plan, we are sitting here today.