

July 7, 2019
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 9
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

2 Kings 5:1-14
Psalm 30
Galatians 6:1-16
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

“...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.”¹

Please be seated.

Today's Gospel reading from Luke is one of the most important Bible passages about what it means to be a *follower* of Jesus. It's about *mission*. For Christians these days, *mission* is a tough word. Hear it said out loud, and one's first thought is perhaps of the old ways of overseas mission, the export of Christianity from Europe that necessitated *conversion*. In too many locations, the church served as the head of the spear of economic exploitation.

As power continues to shift in our increasingly post-colonial world, it can be hard to imagine what the word *mission* might involve today and in the future. On their last Sunday with us, we give thanks that we've had Katherine and Derek to show us some possibilities, through their work in Malawi. We're fortunate to have other folks in this congregation with international experience—for example, Nancy Chapman and Kyle and Ginger Holton. Ironically, their experience might be helpful in our own post-Christian New England setting, as we try to figure out what *mission* might mean right here at home.

I think our Day School is an excellent vehicle for that exploration. Remember, Episcopal schools by definition uphold the principles of the baptismal covenant within an intentionally diverse student population. I'm going to save more about that for a later sermon and instead take a short catechetical break.

This book is one of twelve volumes of what is called *The New Interpreter's Bible*. It's what is called a “Bible commentary.” *The New Interpreter's Bible*, or *The NIB* for short, is one of the most popular ones used by mainline Protestant preachers; it's academic but it's also accessible. There's a lot to learn. This one volume includes the entire Gospels of Luke and John. There's another volume for Matthew and Mark. If you're interested in studying the Bible more closely, I suggest buy these two volumes and use them to dive into the Gospels.

What you'll find is verse-by-verse information about nearly every detail in the Bible. Here's an example. In the first verse of our Gospel today, Jesus appoints seventy to go ahead of him in pairs. Here's what it says about that:

The manuscript tradition is evenly balanced between those that read “seventy” and those that read “seventy-two.” Perhaps more important than resolving the manuscript evidence is the question of the significance of the number. Is it merely a round number for a large group? The significance of the number can probably be traced to the list of nations in Genesis 10, where the Hebrew text lists seventy nations and the Septuagint lists seventy-two. Alternatively, the commissioning may recall Moses’ appointment of seventy elders to help him (Exod 24:1; Num 11:16, 24). The *Letter of Aristeas* records that seventy-two translators, six from each of the tribes, completed the translation of the Septuagint in seventy-two days. The most likely interpretation, however, is that the number is related to the biblical number of the nations (Genesis 10), so that the commissioning foreshadows the mission of the church to the nations (see Luke 24:47).²

That’s a lot of detail. One important thing we should notice is how the Christian tradition is rooted in the Hebrew tradition. That’s something that we always need to remember.

The *NIB* also includes reflections on each passage in the Bible. Here’s part of the reflection on this passage:

The mission of the church has come to be regarded as something that only a few specially called professionals carry out. One has to be called to be a missionary—one doing the mission of the church. The sending out of the seventy(-two), however, which is peculiar to Luke, reminds us that Jesus sent out not just the Twelve, but perhaps all his followers.

...

More than ever ... the church must struggle with its understanding of its mission. Having abandoned one traditional form or expression of that mission, has the church abandoned its mission entirely? How does the church articulate its mission today? Can working with and through agencies and institutions substitute for talking with individuals about their response to the gospel? In what ways can the mission of the church be articulated and pursued by the church today? Such questions do not permit easy answers, but the interpretation of these verses for the church is not complete until it leads us to grapple with these issues. ...

In our own time, the challenges of a shrinking world, ease of travel and communication, multiculturalism, and religious pluralism require us to enter into dialogue regarding what we as American Christians have to offer to people of other cultures and faiths. ... It is not that the mission of the church has become unnecessary or impractical, but simply that the changing conditions of the communities in which we live are forcing us to rethink the Gospel’s teaching about the mission of those who follow Jesus and to find avenues of obedience that are effective and appropriate for our times as well as faithful to Jesus’ teachings.³

That’s a lot to think about. I’m going to change gears again. As we think about what mission means for us, it might be helpful to learn about someone who played a part in shifting the church’s thinking about mission.

This past Thursday was Independence Day. It was also the 110th birth anniversary of a French woman named Madeleine Barot. I learned of her from our own Dr. Dorothy Asch, who mentioned her in passing as a colleague from the World Council of Churches. Dorothy worked for the World Council of Churches in Switzerland for a year. She was helping to organize its second international assembly, which took place in 1954 in Evanston, Illinois. Curious, I googled Madeleine Barot. It turns out that, shortly after World War II, she was one of the *founders* of the World Council of Churches.

But it's what Barot did *during* World War II that really got my attention. Because it synthesizes information from several different sources, I'm going to read from one of the articles I found:

The Righteous Among the Nations is an honorary title given by the State of Israel that signifies those non-Jews who risked life, position and family to save Jewish people from the Nazis. ...

Madeleine Barot was one such woman

She was born into a family of teachers in Chateauroux in the center of France. Finished [with] her studies in Paris at the Sorbonne, she interned at the National Library before going to Rome to work in Government Archives. In 1939, when France declared war, Madeleine returned home and joined the Fédé, a protestant student association where she dedicated much of her time.

When the Nazis invaded, she was asked by the president of the French Protestant Federation, another member of the Righteous, Pastor Marc Boegner, to lead a project called La Cimade (Comité inter-movement auprès des évacués) a Christian movement to help displaced persons during the war.

After the defeat of the French armies, the country was divided into two: North and South. The North was called the occupied zone under direct Nazi control. The South ... set up its government in Vichy. At the time, it was believed that the "Vichy Regime" was autonomous, and many people fled to what they hoped would be freedom. In reality, [the Vichy] were collaborating with Hitler, and it wasn't long before internment camps were set up with tens of thousands of occupants within their boundaries.

Madeleine Barot began her work among these camps and secretly organized the escape of Jewish prisoners.

The internment camps, organized by [the] government, weren't for extermination but more of a holding facility until the prisoners could be transported to ... the North and eventually to Germany. Prisoners, both men and women of all ages, were held there, even entire families were delivered and divided upon arrival. Daily she would show up at the front gate, inventing reasons to get in, from blankets for newborns, to providing medicine for the elderly. In the beginning she was refused entry, but her infatigable presence became so unavoidable that she was able to develop a permanent presence for La Cimade in the camps. She also knew how to work with a diverse team of people with the goal of saving lives.

Among the tactics used was creating false paperwork, hospitalizing patients, changing names and camouflaging children in the local school system. Much of her work was done through a small mountain town of 3,000 inhabitants called Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. It's impossible to know an exact figure, but it's estimated that Ms. Barot, the local pastor André Trocmé and many discrete individuals were able to save the lives of around 5,000 people during the war. Almost twice the size of the village's population. They hid them in the school systems, private families, the church and eventually [guided] them to their escape in Switzerland.

Speaking about her work years later she said, "During the war, we weren't doing charity work, not really; we wanted to express our solidarity with the victims."⁴

After the war, at the World Council of Churches, Barot was an early and important advocate for the inclusion of women in church leadership as equals to me, and in doing that work she worked with important early feminist theologians. Though not a member of the World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church invited her to be one of the very few female official observers at Vatican II. Barot continued her ecumenical leadership for many years. She died in Paris in 1995.

It was back in the beginning of January that I had that exchange with Dorothy about Madeleine. I noticed then in her Wikipedia blurb that her birthday is July 4, and I put a note in my liturgical calendar that I might want to mention her in this week's sermon. I almost didn't, but then I reread that story about her, and I saw those words "internment camps," and couldn't I help but think about what's happening on our American southern border.

I expect I'm not the only one who is feeling exhausted by the news these days. In moments of exhaustion, for me it's helpful to remember people like Madeleine Barot. Like it or not, we have been given this time in which to live, this time in which to love, this time in which to follow Jesus. Each one of us is equipped and ordained. May we never forget that, and never forget this: "the kingdom of God has drawn near."⁵

Notes

¹ Galatians 6:9-10, NRSV.

² R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume IX, *The Gospel of Luke* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 219.

³ *Ibid.*, 221-2.

⁴ Mike Dente, "Women Called by God: Madeleine Barot from the WWII French Resistance," CalvaryChapel.com, February 21, 2018, available at <https://calvarychapel.com/posts/women-called-by-god-madeleine-barot-from-the-wwii-french-resistance> (accessed July 6, 2019)

⁵ Luke 10:11b, NRSV.