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People of Peace

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Cameras.

A feather.

Two golf balls.

Family photographs.

A small piece of wood and fabric from the left wing of the Wright brothers' 1903 airplane, the one that flew at Kitty Hawk.

Consecrated Bread and Wine for Holy Communion.

A disk made of silicone displaying messages of peace from world leaders.

And plaques.

All these items made the extraordinary journey with Apollo astronauts to the moon. Some, like the pieces of the Wright brothers' airplane made the return journey to earth with the astronauts. Others, like the golf balls and the silicone disk reside on the moon to this day. Along with the plaques each Apollo mission brought displaying the date of their lunar landing and the names of the astronauts on that mission. Of the 6 plaques on the moon and 7 produced, only one displays an additional message: the first one brought to the moon in 1969. That message reads: *Here men from the planet earth first set foot upon the moon July 1969. We came in peace for all mankind.*

That message of peace on the plaque is derived from the 1958 National Aeronautics and Space Act's declaration of policy and purpose which states that activities in space by the United States of America should be devoted to peaceful purposes and benefit all mankind. This peaceful intention can also be seen in the list of items the astronauts brought with them to the moon: items that either had personal meaning, were necessary for survival in an inhospitable environment, or were tools to help explore the moon. It could be said that the missions to the moon were missions of peaceful exploration.

Today we heard about another mission of peace in our Gospel when Jesus sent a large number of his followers ahead of him to prepare the places he wanted to visit for his arrival. Those who remember last Sunday's Gospel where Jesus encountered rejection from a Samaritan village might wonder if this mission was Jesus' attempt to prevent other villages from rejecting him. Perhaps if the people in those villages got to know some of his followers and had good experiences of them, they'd be more likely to welcome Jesus and receive all that Jesus has. Scholars and commentators however tell us that this passage is rich in symbolism: recalling how Moses designated the same number of elders to help him in his work as a way of connecting Jesus' followers with the mission of the earliest days of the early church and suggest this passage is a set of directions for those early Christians on how to spread the love of God in Christ to a world that did not know much about him.

Both might be true. Either way, there is a lot here for those of us who are following Jesus today, especially the part about the intention Jesus gives this mission: that it is a mission of peace. Perhaps when we think of the word "mission" we imagine going to distant and exotic lands, but not all missions are foreign. Mission is anytime any one of us brings the peace of God to any person or place, especially places where there is little or no knowledge of God's love as expressed in Jesus. Here in Luke's Gospel we have Jesus himself initiating the mission and the purpose to help people who have not heard of him become familiar with him. And we heard how Jesus intended the missionaries he sent to be: they are to be people of peace in what they say, what they do, and how they travel.

We heard Jesus say he was sending these missionaries out to be lambs among wolves. We've heard something like this before in the peaceable kingdom section of Isaiah, where a sign of the arrival of the Messiah is the lamb eating with the wolf. This wasn't a symbol of the viciousness or predatory nature of one group of people and the innocence of another, but is instead a sign of how two groups that were natural enemies existed side by side without fear. Being people of peace meant those missionaries needed to be being willing to live without fear of people they did not know, understand, or who were different.

We also heard Jesus say those missionaries had to travel incredibly light. No extras. No extra clothing or food or money. This made them vulnerable, totally dependent on God and on the people they were going to encounter. They were in a position to be open to whatever kind of community they encountered, and

could be curious about the people they met. It also meant that as people of peace they were going to be dependent on the community they entered to give them hospitality, as they had nothing to give except for their message about Jesus. It seems Jesus even made it clear the missionaries did not have to worry about eating ritually clean food, as he instructed them to eat what they were given, to share the food of their hosts. This means the missionaries gave that message from a humble place, living with and working with the people who received them.

And the message they gave was a message of peace, brought by their presence and their words. In these times, it was common to greet and take leave of someone with words of peace. But such a greeting and leave taking wasn't just an expression of politeness. The word *peace* in Hebrew, *shalom*, is a word with deep, deep meaning. It means far more than an absence of war or absence of conflict. It is a much more theological word that implies full societal and personal wholeness and well-being made possible only through a connection with God. To wish someone peace was to wish them God's healing, wholeness, and wellness of body, mind, heart, and soul. Jesus was commissioning those first missionaries to embody that peace as a way to help all people get to know him better.

That seems like a big undertaking, especially since it sounds like the people Jesus sent were people like you and me, there is nothing in our Gospel reading that says they were extraordinarily spiritual or gifted communicators. They were just willing to go where Jesus sent them, how he sent them, and to do what Jesus asked them to do. And we heard they returned not complaining of the difficulties, but full of joy for what they had experienced. And what they experienced was seeing how the peace of God really does bring healing and the restoration of well-being.

Whether this is a symbolic story or a historical account, there is a strong message for us who are the church today. Remember, the church really isn't a building; a church is the people who follow Jesus, and we are still called to be missionaries of the peace of Christ. Every Sunday, after we sing the last hymn we are dismissed with the words: Our celebration is ending, and our service is just beginning: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. This just isn't churchy way to say it's time for coffee hour and we hope there will be cake (which I do believe we will have today), it is a reminder that our role and our work isn't just to participate in worshipping God, we are to take what we receive into the mission field beyond our doors, as people of peace, as lambs among wolves. Meaning we are to engage those who are different, who we might not understand, and to do so without fear

or arrogance and show them the peace of Christ. We don't have to travel far to do this; now a-days the missionary field is all around us, especially since church membership is no longer expected.

Which can make talking about Jesus a little intimidating. I remember a parishioner in the first parish I served demand I give him a 2 minute "elevator speech" so he could tell people about his faith in God. When we are afraid, it is natural to want to have something prepared to help break the ice, to give purpose and direction to conversations. But perhaps we need to remember how Jesus sent his missionaries out and reflect on ways we can embody the same methods of peace. First, we don't have to be afraid. We can remember we are called to embody peace, not fear. Being a non-anxious presence will go a long way in helping people see the peace of God. Instead of needing canned programs, elevator speeches, or agendas maybe we can be as vulnerable and open as the missionaries Jesus sent out. That way we can explore as the astronauts remind us, exploration is part of peaceful missions, who we encounter, and receive what they have to give so that our conversations can be genuine and authentic. We don't need to be "right" just honest. And we need to maintain our own connection with God, as we saw the missionaries Jesus sent returned to him bursting to tell him all they had seen and experienced.

As we prepare to go into a new week that will be full of 4th of July celebrations, everyday routines, deadlines, discoveries, work, tasks to accomplish, surprises, meals, (hopefully) times to relax, meetings and partings, we can remember our calling to bring into whatever place we find ourselves in or whomever we find ourselves talking with and listening to the peace of Christ by being the people of peace and we might just find ourselves discovering, as the missionaries did, so much joy along the way.