

Proper 9 C Sermon
July 3, 2022
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Immune to Snakebites
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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. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." 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. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near." 'Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.'

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

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I grew up in an old house on the bluffs of the Mississippi River. Snakes came with the territory. Garter snakes and milk snakes loved the high foliage of the peonies at the foot of our vegetable garden—almost as much as they loved the blackberry patch. On nice summer days, snakes of all shapes and sizes sunned themselves in the green bluff grass where the backyard took a dip toward the river. On more than one occasion our dog took notice of the rather intimidating black snakes that zigzagged their way up the huge Silver Maple in the back yard, trying to get at the nest of wood ducks that lived there.

For the most part, the snakes left us alone and we left them alone. However, the limits of peaceful coexistence began to stretch one morning when, after my dad had already left for work, my mother went down into the kitchen to find a milk snake in the middle of the floor. Needless to say, my mother didn't offer it breakfast! Dad came home from work and eventually caught the snake and put it in a Mason jar for my brother's show and tell.

The most terrifying close encounter of the serpentine kind occurred one balmy day when my dad and my sister were working in the basement. Suddenly, my dad stood upright and calmly but sternly said to my sister, "Lyndee, don't move." Of course, she screamed and ran up the stairs! What she still didn't know, however, was that a five-foot king snake had been tangled in the fishing net just over her shoulder.

If I'm being completely transparent, I don't really like snakes. They were, however, no problem for Jesus' friends, according to Luke's gospel. Jesus had apparently given them "authority to tread on snakes and scorpions" without being injured by them. They were, for all intents and purposes, immune to snakebites. If I'm being honest with you, this seems odd, if not completely unnecessary. Why in the world would those whom Jesus sent out to bear witness to his dream of a heavenly realm of peace rooted in justice, mutual love, and common concern for all need immunity to snakebites?

Since its first telling around a prehistoric campfire, the story about a serpent in the Garden of Eden that convinced the primordial couple to taste the forbidden fruit, snakes have gotten a pretty bad wrap. Throughout scripture they are equated with evil, death, and plague, their meat was forbidden, and their venomous bite was to be feared. Snakes were the very embodiment of evil.

We, however, know different. We know that snakes have an important role to play in the natural order, a place in the delicately balanced ecosystem of nature. If Jesus were sending us out today to bear witness to his vision, chances are, we wouldn't be asking for immunity to snakebites. But I guess it probably depends on what kinds of snakes we expect to encounter.

Since, in the Bible, the snake is viewed as an embodiment of evil, the snakes Jesus regularly encountered included the ruling elites that pitted common folks against each other to maintain control and the agents of Rome, intent on keeping the *Pax Romana* at any cost and at great personal profit. Jesus' message of peace rooted in justice, mutual love, and common concern for all was in direct opposition to many of the leaders of his day—the veritable serpents that truly embodied the kind of evil Jesus hoped to counter. What are the serpents of our day, I wonder?

In 21st century America, we know a little something of these kinds of serpents, don't we? We know something of the snakes that pit common folks against one another in order to maintain control. We know something of the agents of empire maintaining a superficial peace at great personal profit. We know something of the venom poisoning our nation—the venom of polarization: rich against poor, white against black, conservative against liberal, Republican against Democrat, Christian against secularist and against Muslim and against one another. We know something of the toxin that blinds us to the rights of women and plight of the natural world. We know something of serpents, don't we?

And yet, Jesus promised his friends immunity to snake bites. Their venom

could not and cannot dull the truth of his message—of peace rooted in justice, mutual love, and common concern for all.

Friends, the good news for us today is not that we won't get bitten by the serpents of our world, it's that their venom cannot overcome the power of *our* message—of peace rooted in justice, mutual love, and common concern for all. This is still the most powerful antidote to polarization, disparity, discrimination, and violence the world has ever known. Every time we make peace and work for justice, show love and open our hearts and minds in concern for another, we get a little bit closer to the day when evil won't even have fangs to bite with. Let us work for that day. Amen.