

7th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 7.3.16

Scripture: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

I am just in from Budapest, Hungary. This was the last city on our tour—imperial cities of central Europe, a vacation journey that my mom and Buzz treated the ten of us to, the two of them, my sister and her family, my family, and me. I'm exhausted. I'm also deeply grateful to them, and I suspect I'll be ruminating on all I saw and learned and experienced for many weeks, perhaps months, to come.

So, where to begin?

I guess where we ended: Hungary.

As you may know, Hungary is an old culture. According to legend (for that's how old it is—its founding is remembered in terms of legend as much as history), the Magyars came from the East in search of a new land to live in around the year 800. The chieftain's wife, Emese, dreamed of a bird that revealed to her, and to the whole people once her dream was interpreted, what turned out to be once Roman territory where now but a remnant lived. It was at the foot of mountains on the banks of a mighty river, a promising place for a people who lived by hunting and also raising animals. So the whole tribe headed that way, eventually to settle near the Carpathians on the river Danube, and to enslave the people already living there, and to be fruitful and to multiply.

Over time, two cities arose, Buda on the mountainous side of the river, and Pest on the plain. Incidentally, bird statues also arose and eventually abounded, some really big ones, always on the high points above towns and cities.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Over the Magyar's 1200 years in this place, other peoples came and went. The Huns came—which is perhaps why the country is known as Hungary (though in Hungarian signage it's just as often Magyar); and, true to form, they laid everything to waste and then went home. (The Huns were less interested in occupying territory than in looting for treasure and slaves, and then going home.)

Those who remained amidst the devastation replanted and built up, were fruitful and multiplied.

So the Hapsburgs of Austria came—emperors, like chieftains, often looking for prosperous, happy places to make their own. Unlike the Huns, though, the Hapsburgs stayed,

likely having arranged a royal intermarriage, and made Hungary an unenthusiastic partner in the so-called Austro-Hungarian Empire. But their six hundred years of rule came to an end one afternoon in another of their imperial cities, Sarajevo, Bosnia, when an anarchist shot the emperor Franz Ferdinand dead, thus sparking the First World War.

That war left Hungary in ruins —once again in ruins, though, sad to say, not for the last time in ruins. But before much rebuilding got underway, the Nazis came, were invited, in fact, many Hungarians having fallen to Nazi ideology, and perhaps as part of the plan for rebuilding.

Promising salvation, Nazism reigned beginning in 1944 under the Hungarian party, the Arrow Cross. But the Communists had also offered an appealing, messianic ideology. And so began the struggle, the Nazis stoking race war, the Communists stoking class war, and Hungary cannibalizing itself with competing politics of resentment, I imagine nearly everyone traumatized and confused as to what to believe, *whom* to believe. It's hard enough to keep it straight with the perspective that seventy years lends, so to try to sort out truth from propaganda while it all yet unfolds seems an impossible task.

By the end of the Second World War, every bridge once to cross the Danube, and thus to make these two cities one, had been bombed, along with 75% of the city. Nazism was defeated, Communism won the day, and now the terror and dread of that found its way into every aspect of life. Intellectuals, artists, and professionals were punished for their once elite status; non-conformists were deported to Siberia, imprisoned in the gulags, and worked to death; and those suspected of non-conformity were tortured into confessing even when they had nothing to confess. (We visited the chief site of this process of breaking people —once called the House of Loyalty, then the House of Terror, now the Museum of Terror, house number 60 Andrassy Street. A lovely building on a lovely, tree-lined street: the Nazis used it, then the Communists used it. What went on inside couldn't have been further from what it appeared. We warned the children not even to go in to that subterranean level of the museum.)

The city disintegrated further as collectivism failed to work its false magic, until 1956 when students staged a demonstration on Kossuth Square, at the front doors of the House of Parliament, the Orszhaghaz. The established order fought back against the protest, firing shots into the crowd and leaving untold numbers dead —literally untold, as official numbers

hardly match up to personal testimony among those who survived about those whom they lost. And like the Boston Massacre that sparked the American Revolution, the massacre on Kossuth Square sparked the Hungarian Revolution; and though failing to totally upend Communist rule thanks to Soviet tanks brought in for the job, it did at least loosen it so many in Hungary called themselves the Soviet Bloc's "happiest barrack."

Learning all this, *seeing* all this—for it's there to be seen in the architecture (castles, churches), in the public art (fountains, parks), in the memorials and statues and protest-counter-art: witnessing all this while ruminating on Jesus sending his disciples out put a new spin on this familiar fact of the story, that Jesus sent people out to spread the good news that the Kingdom of God had come near.

I know this story well; it's likely we all do. Jesus had been wandering and teaching, healing and restoring. Word of him had spread; people were seeking him out. There were even others doing such things in his name—which the disciples saw and objected to. "We tried to stop him," they said to Jesus of one such rogue disciple. But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you."

But, you know, maybe it was this that had Jesus appointing seventy others and sending them ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he intended to go. Maybe it was this—the dawning sense that the harvest is indeed plenty and the laborers are too few—that had him appointing more laborers. People were open to what Jesus was bringing. People were, it seems, waiting to be gathered in to a movement of blessing and promise, a community of healing and restoration.

But aren't people always open to that? Especially when having suffered some individual or group devastation, aren't people always looking to join up with the one that will save them, with the ones who will make it alright, will set things at long last to right?

Standing in all of these so-called "imperial cities," you look up and notice what symbols have claimed the high ground, what symbols have been set there so people would look up and see them, would *have* to look up to see them. Set as if they were the roof of the world: this high, and no higher, you are to imagine; this high, and no higher, you are to hope for.

Look up in Heroes' Square of Budapest and notice the horsemen, carved in bronze and set upon a high stone plinth. They do indeed look like something come out of the 9th

century. I'll tell you, if I'd been alive then, and I saw them coming through the village gate, I'd have wished for but a quick death. They compose city statuary like nothing I've ever seen.

Look up in Prague and remember that, where an iron metronome covered in graffiti now ticks time away, a statue of Stalin and his beloved "workers" once outsized everything else, even though far away and up high, a most grotesque display of political kitsch.

Same goes in Vienna, a huge plaza spread up on columns and out on marble slabs, with a Soviet soldier at the highest. This, the city promised to keep pristine in perpetuity as a show of appreciation that the Communists left that city largely unharmed. "Thank you for not ruining us. Here's an acre of our city to memorialize you, the people who could have killed us all, but didn't."

Similarly back in Budapest, a huge stone statue of a woman that the people of the city were preparing to erect in honor of an ancient myth I can't remember on one of the highest points of Buda overlooking the river. But the Soviets demanded that place for a statue in their honor. So the city installed what they'd already planned, just changing the emblem in the woman's hands, now a palm leaf of collectivist plenty. Once the Communists were finally gone—died off, faded back into the social fabric, or gone home to Russia, the last of which to have done that in 1998—the people just changed the name of statue. She'd now be called Lady Liberty.

As for more recent times, look up and see the T-Mobile symbol on Budapest's tallest and most powerful cell tower, and McDonald's golden arches on the train station's spire. Look up and pay homage to Tesco, which is sponsoring the refurbishing of the National Museum of the Czech Republic, and to Adidas, a sponsor of the World Cup, which will be broadcast on the screen-stage festooned with their logo.

Look up, look up, and see all the crosses. In Prague, a city of steeples and domes topped off with crosses; in Cesky Krumlov, crosses atop the castle and the cathedral; in Vienna, palace after palace bejeweled with golden crosses; in Bratislava, in Vizsegrad, in Budapest, crosses everywhere.

They were beautiful! Prague's churches, especially, were beautiful for being so fantastical. "That one looks like something out of *Harry Potter*," people remark of the one close to where we stayed.

But, really, what's the difference? Imperialism, Nazism, Communism, Capitalism, Consumerism, Christianity: what's the difference? Isn't it all about conquering territory? Isn't it all about claiming the high ground and getting all beneath to submit? Certainly the church has joined in on that game. At certain times in certain places the Church has behaved as if conquest was its aim. And why not? After all, Jesus sending out of these seventy might suggest that's what we're largely about.

But look, even though Jesus knew he was sending these seventy out amidst the wolves of the world, he was yet sending them out as sheep. "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals." This has been taken to indicate that Jesus meant for the seventy sent in his name to depend upon the kindness of strangers, to rely on the culture of hospitality, even to foster a dependence that would become emblematic of the life of faith. And that might all be true, that might all be right. But it also had this affect, which one commentary I read noted, that "Rather than equipping the disciples for 'Holy War' against infidels, Jesus 'de-equips' them," he strips them of such things and more so there might be nothing hostile about their presentation, there might be nothing threatening about their coming, so there might only peace, which was to be their first word of greeting: "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house.'"

As to whether the people in the house agreed to these terms of peace given and received: if they were to agree, then peace would be shared; and if they weren't to agree, then peace would returned to the one who offered it in the first place. Nothing is diminished; there is only the possibility of increase.

This is a matter of mimesis.

If I have something that I value, which I offer you, and which you then accept from me, you've confirmed that this thing is indeed valuable, desirable. That then could increase its value in my eyes, since now both of us want it; and now we might decide to fight over it, or we might decide to share it.

If, however, I have something that I value, which I offer you, but which you refuse to accept, you've called into question whether this thing is in actual fact valuable, desirable. That then could diminish its value in my eyes, so now I might lose interest in it too or I might retaliate against you for your having diminished the value of something I've been desiring.

Jesus, though, will have none of that, and will have those sent out in his name to have none of that. This peace thing, this gospel thing, this good news of love and redemption by

means of forgiveness for the sake of peace: this is a thing of intrinsic value, of *true* value. What's more, the sharing of it results in its increase while the refusal of it does nothing to diminish it. Of that they were to have confidence. Of this, we are to have confidence. Therefore, if a household refuses the peace offered, those sent out are simply to wipe the dust of town off their feet (their feet not having been washed by any therein) and are to move on. No punishment, no retaliation: one person's uninterest does no harm to the truth.

Notice, please, that the instructions Jesus gave to the seventy as to what to do about those who refuse their offer of peace comes on the heels of the disciples having had another idea. Of one village in particular that refused to accept Jesus and his friends into their homes for hospitality and friendship, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and rebuke them?" And Jesus rebuked them and had them simply move onto the next village. "No," in essence, "No, I don't want you to do that."

And, yes, he went on, then, to say that those places that do refuse peace and truth will have it worse than Sodom had it, a town that did indeed suffer the raining down of fire. And, yes, this does sound vaguely threatening, as if God will see to it that such peoples and places suffer. But Jesus didn't say that God would do this, he instead implied that such things would simply happen, as if because of their refusal of peace. A people's refusal of peace will result in more conflict. A city's rejection of peace will lead to their destruction. That's the choice: ultimately that's the choice: between forgiveness, reconciliation and therefore peace, or resentment, retaliation and therefore destruction. It comes down to that.

That's what Jesus seems to be indicating—and I think of all those places devastated by the First World War, all those places where Nazism took hold for its promises of restoration, and where Communism took hold for its promises of salvation. And, you know, I believe it *was* as bad for the people of those places rigidly enslaved to ideology as it had been for the people of Sodom on whom fire rained.

...which is to say that there *is* a difference. The peace that Jesus meant for those seventy sent out to offer others, to offer the whole world: we can root for its increase without being imperial overlords. The good news of the God whom we meet in Jesus Christ: we can root for the spread of this without being ideological enslaved and effectively dehumanizing. Hoping that people the world over might partake of the gospel, as distinct from all the other

ways of being together and cultivating a society, doesn't make us just one more corporation selling something.

No, because the gospel by its very nature doesn't allow for such a thing. The true gospel is anathema to any such conquering forcefulness, or such a death-dealing social ordering or terrorizing threat or cynical profit-making. The true gospel can only be offered in peace and shared in joy. If it's offered otherwise—even if under the guise of evangelism and under the auspices of the church—it is not the gospel. It's an easy mistake to make, apparently. It's an *evil* mistake to make.

And yet, this thing still holds promise; this thing has retained its value. That we've been entrusted with it is something of a miracle. If we do what we're called to do with this treasure, we probably won't make a name for ourselves, but we might make history.

Thanks be to God.