

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on July 3, 2016 (Proper 9, Year C)

Okay, hold onto your hats. I'm about to talk politics from the pulpit. Well, not exactly. But in the midst of a fairly nasty and sure-to-get-nastier campaign season, there is one particular aspect of politics that seems relevant to our readings this morning: the advance team.

In a political campaign, the work of the advance team is essential, if not glamorous. These folks go from town to town handling the logistics for a candidate's big rallies. The advance team scouts out the location, making sure the backdrop visuals are good. They set up the microphones and teleprompters, they figure out where to put the TV cameras, and perhaps most importantly they make sure enough people are at the rally so it looks good on TV.

When things go smoothly, no one notices the advance team. When they go poorly, everyone does. Just this week Donald Trump gave a speech in front of a bunch of garbage. The idea was to talk about economic revitalization but after observing people on Twitter connect the dots between the candidate and the symbol, I'm pretty sure the advance man in charge heard those familiar words: "You're fired."

One of my favorite stories about advance work comes from a time in my life when I ran political campaigns for a living — you know, before I went to seminary. In 1992, a woman who at the time was the First Lady of Arkansas, was coming to town for a big pre-election rally at Lexington Market in Baltimore. The advance team was charged with setting up Hillary Clinton's tour of the Marketplace but at the very last minute they realized they had to change the route. It seems they were planning to stop by one of the great Baltimore institutions, a sausage place called Polack Johnny's. Now if you're looking for good Polish sausage in Baltimore, Polack Johnny's is your best bet. The problem was that people all across America who were unfamiliar with this Baltimore tradition, would invariably see only one thing: an ethnic slur. Not exactly the kind of exposure you'd want for the wife of someone running for President of the United States in the waning days of a close election. Some crack member of the advance team noted this and a potentially sticky situation, was averted.

I bring this all up because I see parallels between the mission of the seventy disciples sent out by Jesus and the work of an advance team. Luke tells us that the seventy were sent out by Jesus "in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go." So they were sent ahead of Jesus to prepare the townspeople for his arrival. They prepared the way for Jesus by pointing to him, and to his message that the kingdom of God was near. Like the advance team, they left town before Jesus himself arrived and then headed off to proclaim the message of the kingdom to other people in other places. As Jesus' message spread, the seventy were integral members of his team and in a very real sense they were advance men for Jesus.

Now I'm certainly not comparing Jesus to a political candidate. He said some memorable things to be sure, but the Sermon on the Mount wasn't meant to be a series of sound bites; Jesus wasn't

trying to get elected Messiah; the cross wasn't merely a good visual. And let's face it, if Jesus was running for office in modern day America, he'd lose. Big time. But he dedicated his entire life to getting his message of hope and forgiveness and love and salvation out to the whole world. And to do this effectively he needed helpers, laborers to be sent out into the harvest to help spread the word; disciples to witness to the power of God's love for all humanity, followers to tell the story. And he still does.

Which is why we are invited to participate in this work as witnesses to God's love in the world. But how do we do this? How do we participate in the reconciling work of Jesus Christ? Well, the first step is to point beyond ourselves; to proclaim Christ and not ourselves. Our job is to prepare a place for Jesus in our lives, but it's not to be the messiah. That role is already taken.

For guidance in this, we can again look to the advance team. Because no advance man worth his salt draws attention to himself. He doesn't step up to the microphone to speak, but rather he turns it on and checks the volume for the candidate. He makes sure the podium is in place and that the stage is secure. He makes sure the crowd has gathered, and then he takes a step back. There must be humility in this work. A humility that recognizes the limitations of the role. A humility St. Paul attests to in his letter to the Galatians. "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Essential advice for the seventy and essential advice for us if we are to truly and humbly serve Christ as fellow members of his advance team.

The next step is to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Which means enacting the words of Jesus in your everyday life. In how you act, in how you treat people and, yes, even in how you vote. Now, politically, we may or may not agree on what this means. I'll just keep preaching the gospel of Jesus, but you must decide how that gospel translates into reaching out to a broken and sinful world. And then pull the lever for the candidate you think best reflects this vision. Even when your true answer may well be "none of the above."

Finally, it's about sharing your experience of God with others. This doesn't mean going out two-by-two to knock on doors (thanks be to God). But it does mean being willing to tell people that you go to church, letting them know that your relationship with God is important to you, and that your faith is an integral piece of your identity. That's it. We do our best to prepare the way for God's entrance into the lives of those we meet, but we're not asked to do the really hard work of conversion itself. That's up to God. Our role, like that of the seventy disciples, is to participate by sharing the good news of the kingdom of God. We share the message, but it's not up to us how it is received or when it is received or if it is received. Jesus takes it from there.

Of course, in a campaign, once the preparations are made, it is the candidate who must take it from there. The ultimate responsibility lies with the candidate and not with the members of the advance team, as crucial as they may be to a successful effort. So it is for us who seek to do advance work for Jesus. We point to Jesus, but we ourselves are not Jesus.

May you be drawn ever deeper into the reconciling work of our Lord. And know that your participation in it, matters deeply.