

Dennis Hope is an American entrepreneur who has made millions of dollars over the past 42 years selling real estate. But not just any real estate. Dennis Hope sells extraterrestrial real estate; he sells properties on the moon. He has no legal authority to do so, but that has not prevented many thousands of people from lining up to buy what he is selling. He claims to have sold more than 600 million acres of land on the moon. He charges \$36.50 U.S. per acre, which includes an official copy of the deed. The deed, of course, is worthless because the moon is not Dennis Hope's to sell. I suppose part of the fun in purchasing your own little piece of the moon comes from imagining you possess something that you cannot see or touch.

I mention Dennis Hope's moon-based real estate business on the same day our gospel lesson describes Jesus sending out seventy disciples to proclaim to anyone who will listen the message that the kingdom of heaven is near, because they too were encouraging people to believe in something that they cannot see or touch – the kingdom of heaven. Do you believe in what the seventy disciples were proclaiming, that God's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, is nearby? I hope you do.

I think that by sending out those seventy unnamed disciples to proclaim God's kingdom, Jesus was preparing us to be his disciples as well. The challenge for all Christian disciples, then as now, is to convince others of the existence of something that they cannot see and touch, which is the presence of God's kingdom in their lives. That is why the success of conveying that message relies upon the integrity of the person making the claim, namely, you and me. Any time that we attempt to fulfil our Christian duty and practice discipleship, it is our actions rather than our words that always speak loudest. Think of the ancient admonition that we are to "Preach the Gospel at all times and use words if necessary."

In today's gospel account of Jesus sending out those first seventy disciples we are witnessing a significant change taking place. Up to that point, Jesus had been the leader and the disciples had only been the followers; Jesus had been the teacher, and the disciples were just the pupils; Jesus had been the active one, and the disciples had been passive spectators. But on the day recorded in today's gospel reading, Jesus switched things up. He believed the disciples were prepared. He turned them from being mere spectators and followers, into active and responsible participants in his mission.

Every now and again all of us would benefit from asking ourselves, "What sort of Christian am I? Am I a passive spectator, or am I an active participant in Christ's mission?"

Jesus gave the seventy disciples specific advice and instructions as he sent them on their way. He warned them that they would face dangers and be like lambs amid wolves. He told them that failure was a very real possibility, and that they should expect to be misunderstood and rejected at times. Do you have some idea of what it is like to be misunderstood, dismissed, or rejected because of your Christian beliefs?

Jesus told the disciples that when they arrived at their destination they were to be satisfied with whatever food and accommodation had been provided them. They were not to become restless, expecting more than was given them. He told them to be at peace, wherever they ended up.

How about you? Are you at peace with the circumstances of your life? What would need to change in your life, for you to be at peace?

The seventy disciples were told to spread the good news that God's kingdom is nearby. They were not to argue with people who refused to accept that good news. Jesus understood that we cannot force anyone to accept God and to believe in God's kingdom. After all, do not all of us have acquaintances, friends, family members even, who think this Christian religion and kingdom of God talk is nonsense?

Did you notice that Jesus mentioned only one specific action that he expected the seventy disciples to perform? He instructed them to heal the sick. We easily underestimate the great power of Christian faith to heal people; to heal their fears, angers, and anxieties. We sometimes underestimate the great power of Christian faith to provide people with a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. And I am certain that we often underestimate our own ability

and readiness as Christians to be healers for others. In sending out the seventy disciples, Jesus was demonstrating that he knew they were ready. Similarly, each of us in our individual way is ready to offer God's healing to others who suffer.

We are ready, as Christians, to accompany others into their places of pain, and to share the burdens of their brokenness, and fear and confusion and anguish. Despite our own flaws and insecurities, we have been prepared by God, each in our own way, to be healers by immersing ourselves in the weakness of the weak, in the vulnerability of the vulnerable, and in the powerlessness of the powerless.

A navy chaplain told the story of being on a destroyer in the north Atlantic where the water was so cold a person could survive in it for only a few minutes. One night the dreaded signal sounded that a sailor had fallen overboard. The ship's captain immediately ordered the ship turned around in the direction it had come. Emergency crews got ready. Search lights plied the ink black night and waters. Each passing minute seemed an eternity as all aboard the ship knew that their shipmate would be dead in just minutes unless he was found. After about ten minutes the sailor was spotted in the icy water. A rescue diver jumped in and attached a harness around the sailor's chest, and the barely conscious man was pulled to safety.

Some time later the ship's chaplain asked the rescued sailor when it was that he realized his life would be saved. The sailor answered, "It was only when the rescue diver was in the water with me, beside me, that I knew I would be okay."

And that is the point, is it not? Jesus sent out the seventy disciples to be with people in their time of difficulty, to heal them, and to provide assurance that the kingdom of God is near. If we are followers of Christ, as we profess to be, why would anything less be expected of us?

In this world of ours, where people all around us are often drowning in their own private oceans of grief and pain and loneliness and a host of other afflictions, God sent Jesus, who in turn sent disciples, people who were willing to plunge into the troubled waters of other peoples' lives. The last thing drowning people need is an audience. What they need is someone who will get into the water with them, and help. That is what God in Christ has done for us. That is what Jesus called the original seventy disciples to do. And that is what Christ calls us to do. Get into the water, in whatever way we can as Christians, and help Christ to help others.

You know, Jesus' earthly ministry only lasted three years before he was arrested and killed. It is logical to wonder why, if Jesus came to teach, he did not stick around longer to teach more. And why, if Jesus came to heal, did he not remain longer than just three years so that he could heal more people? Lord knows, there are always more people in need of physical and emotional healing.

I think the answer is Jesus did not come to teach the crowds so much as he came to teach disciples to teach the crowds. And Jesus did not come to heal people so much as he came to show the disciples how to heal people in his name.

God calls each of us to find our own unique and hands-on way of helping to make God's kingdom a reality for others. Since none of us are completely free of our own fears and insecurities and doubts and wounds and weaknesses, God also promises to be a comforting presence beside us, as we do our best to offer God's comforting presence to others.

Therefore, trust in God that you are ready to be a faithful disciple of Christ. Because unless our faith in God becomes a tangible expression of help for others, any talk of the kingdom of God being near in our own time is no more substantial than buying an acre of land on the moon. **Amen.**