

The Rev. Courtney Davis-Shoemaker
Urban Resident at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Lynn

Proper for Church Mission- Epiphany, Winchester
Luke 10:1-9

"May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable to You, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer." AMEN

Good morning- it is a great pleasure to join y'all this morning for worship. My name is Courtney Davis-Shoemaker and I serve as the Urban Resident at St. Stephen's in Lynn. Ordained a priest last January, my ministry is being shaped at St. Stephen's- my first parish, much like my rector, The Rev. Jane Gould, was shaped here at Epiphany.

Sometimes I'm asked how I ended up in Lynn because you may have noticed I'm not from this area...I grew up in Rome, Ga- a small traditional Southern town. There everyone looked similar to the way I look- there was very little diversity. Years later I moved to Boston and worked at Trinity Church in Copley Square which eventually sponsored me for ordination. While working at Trinity and then at the General Theological Seminary in NYC I began to feel called to serve in an urban congregation. I don't speak another language fluently... I had not had much experience in urban settings but I can only say that I felt God calling me to serve in a context different from any I had known. While in seminary I served in a small, struggling congregation in Brooklyn for two years and I deeply enjoyed the time I spent each month hosting 8 men at the shelter on our campus. When returning to MA to look for my first position I could not believe it when an Urban Resident position became available... these are positions unique to our diocese for newly ordained clergy. Urban Residents are hired to work in an urban parish and my salary is paid for by the diocese since the congregation can't afford to hire two clergy. The urban residence program offers new clergy an opportunity for training in multi-cultural, economically diverse communities.

At St. Stephen's in Lynn, we identify our mission as "Crossing lines of color, class, culture, and generation, as we gather as God's people committed to making Christ's Gospel of love, compassion, and justice know in our lives and in our community." We strive to create a safe, loving community in which people gather to worship God and to connect with one another. Known as one of the poorest cities in MA, there are 28 gangs in the city of Lynn. Members of our youth group regularly hear gun shots in their neighborhoods, and know individuals involved in gangs. Many people ask me how the economic crisis has affected the community of Lynn. The lines at our food pantry have continued to grow and each week more and more people come asking for financial assistance. Yet this is a community that has always been on the edge since many industries left the area over the past thirty years. Individuals that may have found stability are now struggling again and those who were struggling, continue to do the best they can.

A few weeks ago, we had a particularly challenging day at St. Stephen's. We had recently learned that a member of our youth group was struggling- he wasn't going to school and literally locked himself in the basement for several days. On this particular afternoon, we received

a frantic phone call from the mother that this young person had started throwing objects and things were getting out of control. She spoke with great urgency and soon the line went dead. Within minutes, we also received a text message that a beloved parishioner had a heart attack and her grandchildren were on the way to the church for The Spot, our after-school program on Tuesday afternoons. Who should tell them the news? These two grandchildren lost their grandfather 6 months earlier and had recently put the grave stone in place- now we needed to break the news that their grandmother was in the hospital. We know these young people well and we knew that there would not be any easy way to tell them the news. One young person in a potentially dangerous situation with a frantic mother calling for help. Two young people on their way- unaware of the news they would soon learn.

A former Urban Resident and current priest at St. Peter's in Salem, The Rev. Daniel Valez Revera happened to be in the office that afternoon for a meeting with Rev. Jane but the circumstances demanded all of our immediate attention. Daniel, Rev. Jane, our part time youth minister, Jazon Cruz and I quickly decided who needed to stay to tell the two about their grandmother and who would leave to assist the mother and her child. We didn't have a lot of time and the decisions happened quickly. Soon Rev. Daniel and I were in our cars headed to the family's home and Rev. Jane and Jason spoke to the grandchildren as soon as they arrived at St. Stephen's. As Daniel and I made our way to the house, We spoke by phone so I could give him background information that would Help him better understand the situation. As I approached the house, I told Daniel how grateful I felt that he had been at St. Stephen's that afternoon...He said, "Courtney, this is why Jesus sent the disciples out in twos. We aren't supposed to do this alone." As I hung up the phone, I praised God for the fact that I wasn't doing it alone- Daniel was with me, God was with me.

Our gospel this morning tells us that Jesus selected seventy followers and sent them out in pairs to every town, every place that he intended to go. Jesus felt an urgency to get his message out but he didn't send Seventy out alone- he could have made sure more towns were covered if he had sent seventy individuals but, instead, he sent pairs. And as I think about Jesus sending out pairs, I think about what a gracious and wonderful God we have for in my own experience I know how thankful I am that Daniel was present with me, and how grateful I am every time I can go to Rev. Jane to get her good counsel and advise. Jesus did not send the seventy out on their own because Jesus knew that the work is hard.... he knew that not everyone would accept the message of his followers. He knew they would be turned away in places, possibly even driven out. Jesus instructed his followers not to take much- to travel light and to stay in homes, and move on if needed. These instructions meant his followers would be dependant on others. They would need to meet people in towns that could provide food and shelter and in these encounters, his followers would be able to spread the Good News of Jesus. He instructed them to heal anyone who is sick and proclaim, "The Kingdom of God has come near to you."

Jesus desires to be in relationship with us and for us to be in relationship with one another. Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs.... In my ministry, I am blessed to have the opportunity to learn and grow in an urban setting since many urban churches are not able to afford assistants. Some churches, like Epiphany, are able to have several clergy on staff meaning that

clergy can support larger congregations and support one another in times of conflict or challenges. But it seems that ministers are not the only ones that need to work together in pairs or in groups...

Parents support the growth of children, or in cases of single parent homes- friends and family members may also join in, lawyers work with assistants and counsel, nurses, residents and staff support doctors, writers work with editors, musicians collaborate with band members and managers, artists talk with mentors and teachers, chefs work with waiters and mangers, architects partner with contractors and interior designers, real estate agents confer with inspectors and lawyers, teachers discuss ideas with colleagues and assistants... whatever our vocations, whatever our own ministries, there are those we turn to for help, for assistance, for advice, There are those that help us in times of conflict and celebrate with us in our successes. We are not alone...for God sends us out to collaborate and work together ... God desires us to have relationships in which we find support in our vocations, those relationships which help to sustain us day to day.

Yet the ultimate relationship is the one we have with God, through God's son Jesus Christ. Though I deeply appreciate the work of my colleagues and mentors, I ultimately believe that I could not do the work I am called to do without my relationship with God. When I am told that a young Liberian mother has been beaten by her boyfriend and I need to come to see her, I turn to my mentors to ask for advice but I turn to God to unleash my anger, hurt and frustration on why this is happening to a young woman. When I read in the paper about another gang related shooting two blocks from St. Stephen's, I go to our Street Outreach worker to find out about the families yet I turn to God to pray for the one who has been shot and for the perpetrator of the crime. When I receive a call about a man in the hospital for attempting suicide, I speak to his social worker and therapist to find how I may best be of assistance but I pray to God to give me the words I need to help this man in such agony.

And then there are the good times...When I learn that the diocese has camp scholarships available and we can help over twenty kids go to the Barbara C. Harris Camp for a week, many who have never been to camp before- I turn to God and praise God for the amazing opportunity they will have. When I get a call that St. Stephen's receives a grant to help fund our Kids in Community Summer Program, I thank God for the chance that more than 80 children will have to come to a five week, FREE, safe, summer program. When I walk into St. Stephen's on a Friday afternoon and witness the amazing group of volunteers serving those who come to our food pantry, I pause and give God praise for the volunteer's time and for the relationships they are forging with many in our community. When I meet with parishioners for a book discussion on The Shack, or for Bible study, I feel great joy in being able to help individuals think about their faith and their relationship with God- and I rejoice and give thanks for the opportunity I've been given to serve as an Urban Resident in Lynn.

Jesus sent his followers out in pairs to support one another, to work collaboratively, To grow in relationship with one another and with all those they encountered. Through our relationships, we come to better understand The kind of relationship God desires to have with us! It is not a one way line of communication-It is not a list of prayers or desires...It is a relationship in which God listens to us And we listen to God. It is a collaborative, loving, nurturing

relationship! May our relationship with those we work with, those we study with, our partners, our spouses, continue to nurture us and allow us to grow as individuals. May our relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, be The foundation, the cornerstone, the beginning and the end of all our relationships so that in every moment we know we Are not alone- God is with us.

AMEN