My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our grateful hearts, minds, Spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

So last week we talked about how we are blessed by God in our lives, sure, but how difficult it is to respond to God’s call, because after all, we are all called, aren’t we?

Aren’t we? Can I get an “Aaaay-men to that? OK.

So we heard about the 70 disciples who were sent out to spread the Good News, didn’t we? And they were met with various reactions, some welcomed, some not so much. I think this was Jesus’ attempt to show that the language of God is in the world, and once reminded that all were created from God, of God, in God’s image, that it was just really hard to get folks to understand their role in God’s unfolding Kingdom here on earth. It seems like there were an awful lot of folks who didn’t understand what was being asked of them, or if they did, they could not fathom actually participating in it.

Back in 1985, a sociologist named Robert Bellah wrote a book called, “Habits of the Heart”, and it talked about how religion in America had started as being a highly public and unified faith, as it did in colonial New England, to become much less so—extremely private and diverse. We here at Community Congregational Church of Greenland saw that happen since our founding in 1706. No, not any one of us, but that shift happened during our existence, and I’d like to let us think about whether we’ve noticed that shift. Bellah quotes a young nurse, Sheila Larson, and he tries to demonstrate this shift through her. She said the following:

“I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice ... It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think [God] would want us to take care of each other.”

Bellah says “Sheilaism” creates the possibility "of over 220 million American religions, one for each of us." He goes on to suggest that Sheilaism may represent "a perfectly natural expression of current American religious life". "Sheilaism" is rooted in an attempt to transform external authority to internal meaning.

Now, some folks may prefer to choose a religion of external authority for this purpose, such as evangelical rules-based salvation frameworks or Catholic faith. But Bellah says religion in principle is a choice, a direct result of the religious freedom gained in the western world through the traits of western modernity that we inherit today, with our individualization of experiences such as music, news, and other things that computers and mobile phones have magnified in our lives and those of younger generations than ours.

Bellah saw this individualism as a kind of self-absorption that meant that people are suspicious of all kinds of institutions of civic life that linked us to a single moral or ethical cause. Many organizations that link us to our shared history are suffering decline, such things as the Lions Club, or the DAR, Scouting, or museums of shared history such as Strawberry Banke have had to figure out that it’s not enough to just think people will come support them because, well, why wouldn’t they? Don’t they know? Don’t folks understand what these institutions and their collective memory means to the people who live here?

The short answer is no, folks don’t know. Sheilaism says that institutions should dramatically change to accept us as we want to be if they want our participation. And the problem is that folks who were socialized with this way of thinking believe it’s enough. Until it’s not. And it’s really hard to get into a group when you’ve not invested any time or effort into it. People are suspicious of new things, thinking that scams and criminals are involved every time the phone rings.

But people still need connections. Particularly when life gets difficult, and friends drift away when the going gets tough. Job loss. Divorce. Illness. Death. Stuff that no one talks about is what drives people to wonder what it’s all about and what it’s all worth.

And that’s the time when God can help. God says that life is good, enjoy it, but when the chips are down and everyone’s gone, God’s still here, waiting.

I think that’s what today’s scripture’s all about. The Scripture says that it’s not just Jesus who’s doing the work, but the 70 sent out. And they’re not trying to figure out on their own what to offer; God gives that. There’s no magic words to mitigate trouble. Only the presence of another heart who says, “I’ve been there. I know, too, because I’ve been through it, and it won’t always be like this.” There’s no additional training needed; it’s a ministry of open hearts, vulnerable souls, shared experiences.

Why do they visit? Why do we want to grow our church? Not for more butts in seats, or more chowder bowls at our luncheons. We want to offer peace, healing, fellowship, and when we both don’t know answers, we can pray for guidance and grace. We can offer a heart that knows. THAT’s not something that can be done individually or with a mobile or facebook post.

That’s church.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts on this Independence Day service.

We are a nation of many backgrounds and makeups People with all different viewpoints. We can’t get everyone to agree, that’s why government only expects 50% to pass motions and 2/3 to override vetoes because we will never, ever all agree all the time. But we still try to find consensus, because it keeps us focused on talking rather than decreeing.

Jesus never says that we will be successful. He gives us tools for when, not if, folks won’t accept our message the first time. But the message is this: we welcome all, everyone. The “70” were representative of all the nations of Biblical antiquity, when there were thought to be 70 nations. God’s welcome is for all peoples, and in our re-thinking who we are at CCCG, we should return to that biblical mandate of hospitality first.

If we can welcome, if we can heal, if we can comfort, then we’re doing God’s work. It’s hard to convince folks who aren’t in crisis that they need to be with us right now. But in knowing that we’re near and here, we, too, will understand God’s kingdom has no timeline that says that we have to do it today. We’ve been here 300 years.

And with the help of God, we’ll be here 300 more.

For the independence to once again plot our own course in this world and hear that God is still speaking, thanks be to God on this day of freedom for a new faith.

Amen.