

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 4, 2021
Mark 6:1-13
Pastor Jill Henning

Grace and peace to you. My name is Pastor Jill Henning and I serve as the Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership and Administration for the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA and I bring you greetings from Bishop Kevin Strickland and the Southeastern Synod staff on this 6 Sunday after Pentecost and your siblings in Christ across Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee.

As Jesus traveled from Capernaum up into the hill country above the Sea of Galilee, he was heading home. He had just made a significant impact down at the lakeshore, healing a woman who snuck up behind him in a crowd, and bringing a dead girl to life. On the road, he was a star. Now it was time to head back home, time to taste some of mom's home cooking. It was time to see how the Kingdom of God might be received in more familiar territory.

Mark gives us two stories in this reading, and it might seem at first that they are not related to each other. First, we have the story of Jesus returning to Nazareth and meeting with some resistance. Jesus should have had a home town advantage, but he didn't. Things start out well, but as soon as he started teaching in the synagogue, people are amazed, and they see to think this hometown boy has gotten a bit too big for his britches.

There is even a hint of scandal as the people of Nazareth question his authority. They ask, "Isn't this Mary's son?" instead of, "Isn't this Mary and Joseph's boy?" It's a slight, just short of an insult to skip over naming the father as the head of the household. It hints at the possibility that Jesus was an illegitimate child, bringing shame to his whole community.

To honor someone in the time of Jesus was a transaction. If someone gained honor in the community, that meant that someone else had to lose. It was a balancing act between shame and honor.

And here was Jesus, claiming the honor of a prophet for himself! That balancing act was being upturned, it meant someone – probably the synagogue leaders – would have to lose honor. So, they do what so many do, put him in his place first. He's just a builder, nothing more. Nothing to see here, just keep moving.

The lack of faith he sees among his hometown friends and family must have been amazing to Jesus. In fact, it seems that the lack of faith in Jesus effects his ability to do what he had been doing, Mark writes, "And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." (v.5)

I'm not sure what to read into that text. Matthew's version cleans things up a bit for us. Matthew says Jesus "did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith" (Matt 13:58), making it sound more like Jesus chose not to work any wonders.

But maybe the question isn't whether or not Jesus chose not to or couldn't do any but maybe the question is, how does our lack of faith affect the way God works?

We all know the story about the man whose house is being overcome by a flood and someone comes and tells him that he needs to evacuate and he says "God will take care of me" and next comes a boat to whisk him away to safety and he says "God will take care of me" and he sends the boat along. The water rises and he climbs to the rooftop where a helicopter comes to rescue him and he waves them away, again saying "God will take care of me". When the waters claim his life, he enters the pearly gates and says to God "What happened, why didn't you take care of me?" and God responds "I sent you someone to tell you to leave and you didn't. I sent a boat to rescue you and you didn't go. I sent you a helicopter to take you to safety and you wouldn't leave. What else did you want?"

Now I'm not saying that God's grace is dependent on something we do but let's look at what does happen in Nazareth. Jesus does heal a few. There are at least some who seek him out in faith, just like Jairus did on behalf of his daughter, just like the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years did.

I think there is a connection between this first story and the second story in our Gospel for today. Jesus knew what he was asking his disciples to do when he sent them out. He knew that some of those they encountered would be excited to receive the witness that the disciples brought but he also knew that for some they would face people that questioned where they came from and how they had this power. And so, Jesus send the disciples out to spread his mission but he has a plan.

They don't do it alone. He sends them with someone else to walk this journey with them, someone to bear the burden but also to share the joy. He equips them to live into their identity. They aren't burdened by what they are to take but to come as they are to share their gifts but also to receive the gifts of those who offer hospitality. And if the message they bring is not received, it's not their job to convince anyone of the message but to literally shake the sand off their feet and move on. I've been to the Holy Land and there is a lot of sand, shake it off and move on. Don't look back but keep on keeping on.

The writer of Mark links these two stories together because these two stories teach us a lot to what it means to live into our call of discipleship. We are called to go into the world. Matthew tells us that Jesus calls us to "Go therefore to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." But we don't go alone.

Jesus sends his disciples out in pairs – why because discipleship is not a solo sport. We aren't meant to do this work alone. God created us to be in community and God calls us to the work of the kingdom of God with one another and the first part of today's Gospel reminds us that when we open ourselves for God's presence in our lives we are transformed.

David Lose writes, “What if... Mark is simply inviting us to contemplate the possibility that we actually have something to do, that we have an important role to play in the manifestation of the kingdom. To say it another way: this isn’t about salvation, it’s about the role each one of us is invited to play in sensing, experiencing, and making known God’s will and work in the world.”

Julian of Norwich wrote “The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything.” What if we saw God in the person who drives us nuts? What if we saw God in the struggles of life? What if we saw God in the mirror when we saw our own image?

God is present right here, right now. How might we be encouraging God to work in our lives? How might we be preventing God from doing the work God want to perform in us?

We’ve all been there. We’ve all had those times when we have turned to God and said “Fix it”. Fix the pain, fix the brokenness, fix the things the regrets, fix the grudges that we hold onto and aren’t willing to let go of. We’ve questioned, like the neighbors of Jesus who wondered how this carpenter can do the things people have said that he can do. We’ve wondered if this grace is enough, if the love of God is enough.

This isn’t only about accepting God’s grace to save us and inviting Jesus into our hearts. We Lutherans are good at disclaiming that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, that the theology of the cross – God’s willingness to take our pain, our suffering, our hurt to the cross is enough. We are saved by faith. But is that enough?

Each of us that have been washed in the waters of baptism and had God declare to the world that we are God’s, we are loved, just as we are, also knows that with that promise also comes the call to live into that baptismal identity. “Let your light shine” we are told, not for our own glory but to shine the light of the God that created us. We each are a part of that puzzle that makes up the kingdom of God in this world. We are changed by that love. We are changed by that baptismal identity to live as the body of Christ in the world.

The disciples who followed Jesus to Nazareth didn’t abandon Jesus when the town rejected his message. They were watching closely to see what he would do. As Jesus kept on with his ministry of preaching good news and healing the sick, casting out unclean spirits and giving hope to the poor, the disciples were learning what it means to be a true follower of Jesus.

And that brings us to the second part of the story.

In today’s passage from Mark, Jesus gives some very specific directions to his disciples. He tells them what to take, and what not to take with them on their journey. It’s clear that Jesus wants his followers to go out in his name, completely depending on God to provide for their needs through the hospitality of others. Jesus knows that they will probably face rejection in at least some of the towns they visit.

They saw the way he left Nazareth and went into the nearby villages to keep preaching and healing. Now he tells them to shake off the sand from their feet as they leave any place that does not receive them or their message. If you can't force someone to accept the gifts you bring, all you can do is offer them and move on.

So, they go – and their ministry is fruitful. No doubt they ran into some who didn't accept them from time to time. We know that the further Jesus went in his ministry the more opposition he faced and people were threatened by his message. But that didn't stop Jesus, it didn't stop Jesus from dying on the cross for you and for me, from rising from the dead to say that death does not and will not have the last word.

We have a lot of work to do, Dear Church. Love is love. God is love. We are loved. We can't force someone to comprehend a message that they are not ready to receive but we can still plant the seed and let God water the garden. Shake off the sand, move on but know this Christ calls us only to places where Christ is already willing to go with us and Dear Church that means that we do not need to be afraid. Fear keeps us from experiencing God's presence and God's Spirit at work in our lives. When we shrink back from stepping out on faith, we shortchange ourselves and Christ can do no power in us.

Following Jesus means putting it all on the line. Some will hear the transformational message of hope that comes from the empty tomb but others won't. That doesn't mean we should stop sharing it. Some may walk away from it but who knows maybe, just maybe through your voice, through your actions, your acceptance they might just glimpse the God of the creation and hopefully through your voice, through your actions, your acceptance you will know the presence of God that goes with you every step of the way. Amen