

Pastor's Message – 6/27/2021
Mark 6:1-13

The Gospel of Mark is filled with action. From the beginning Jesus is teaching, healing, and casting out demons. By the time we get to chapter 6, we have already witnessed many miracles which Jesus has done. Then he comes home to Nazareth: The Podunk of Galilee. Nazareth, that little backwater town that is despised and looked down on by the rest of Israel. Here is their big chance to show that something good can come out of Nazareth. We would expect that the Nazareth Gazette would run the headline, "Local Boy Makes Good" or that there would be a parade with Jesus as the grand marshal. We might expect them to name a street after him or to at least to invite him to be the guest of honor at the Rotary or the Lions' club.

Yet, we soon discover that this is not the case. Jesus comes into town and goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath. He takes his place as an adult male and teaches that day. He is not like the Jesus they watched grow up. He has grown and changed. He is no longer the obedient child learning how to handle a carpenter's plane. He stands tall and speaks with authority. He has words and ideas that are far beyond what he could have learned in Nazareth. The stories of the mighty deeds he has done are talked about in hushed tones as his one-time neighbors listen to him teach. And they are offended! "He is not like one of us." "He has changed." "Who does he think he is, anyway?"

This is the third of three stories in Mark in which Jesus encounters resistance at a local house of worship, but this last controversy, in his own hometown of Nazareth, is especially bitter. It comes following a demonstration of the power of Jesus over both illness (the woman with a flow of blood) and death (Jairus' daughter). The region is abuzz with news about Jesus and astonishment at his actions as well as his words.

After these amazing works, verse 5 reads, "And because of their unbelief, he couldn't do any miracles among them except to place his hands on a few sick people and heal them." It is a bit shocking, and apparently may have shocked both Matthew and Luke, since both of them have modified it considerably (Matthew 13:58 and Luke 4:23-24). It sounds as if Jesus' power requires the faith of others, which is not consistently sustained in the Gospel of Mark. Yet the point seems to be that Jesus finds their "unbelief" amazing, and he now experiences for the first time the kind of hostile rejection which is his destiny.

Mark reports that "he couldn't do any miracles among them." What a tragic epitaph to scrawl across the memory of Nazareth. To think that the One and Only was there in their midst, and they didn't know it. And because they didn't recognize and believe, they limited what he could do in their midst.

They didn't recognize Jesus for who He was. So, who is Jesus? Is He only the carpenter from Nazareth, as claimed by some in this week's Bible reading? Why is this the most they are able to see in Him? What are they missing in terms of who He is? Notice how so many around Jesus in the gospel of Mark don't "get it" about who Jesus is; even those that we might most expect to understand, such as His disciples.

As current readers of this gospel and followers of Jesus today, we are on a journey of growing understanding about who Jesus is. With the early hearers of this story, we too are invited to ask the question for ourselves "who is Jesus?" What do we recognize in Jesus and

believe about Him? How do we respond to what we have come to believe about Him? Remember the woman and Jairus in the passage from last week? Both of them believed in something about Jesus that went well beneath the surface of where he came from. Their understanding of who He was and their faith in who He was moved them to action.

This story holds meaning both for our individual faith journeys and for our lives in our Church. Any teacher, pastor, health worker, visionary, or parent already knows that we get more done when both parties agree at least on a common direction. With a shared view about where we're going, and who has the right to be in charge of the trip, a big part of the work is done. We all know places where congregations, partners, or children have agreed to something and then failed to act on it, because they didn't really believe in it. They just didn't want to say so, or to argue about it, or maybe didn't think we would listen anyway. At least the people in Jesus' hometown were honest about their disbelief!

American culture generally understands power more as control than collaboration, but the example of Jesus and His disciples reminds us that the kind of power that changes lives, hearts, and spirits is different. This is the kind of power that requires everyone to be present and involved. For leaders, too, this is a strong reminder that we're not in this alone. Other people have wisdom, energy, passion, and creativity to enhance our own, and bring talents we don't have to the work of the Spirit.

Much has been written about people who are "spiritual but not religious." It's true that we can have spiritual lives and experiences all by ourselves, but we miss the greater challenge and rewards of being in a community of people. Without other people around to offer support or challenge, wisdom or the aggravation that leads to growth, our lives are narrow, and our God looks a lot like us.

Perhaps that was the problem back at home for Jesus -- he looked a little too familiar for them to see the full power of God in Him. Without their belief, He was just the carpenter's son. We get the God we have faith in, after all.

Jesus' power of healing began with the work that He was doing Himself, but Jesus was also an effective leader and delegator—always extending the power to others to do the caring work. When Jesus sends His disciples out to the surrounding villages, He also prepared them for rejection, just as He will again in chapter 13 when the disciples ask Jesus about the future. They are to clearly and decisively leave behind those places where they receive neither a welcome nor a hearing.

The disciples are to travel simply and lightly. They are to be satisfied with the first home to which they are welcomed in each place. They are also instructed to take little in the way of provisions in keeping with the tone of the whole of Mark's gospel, there is urgency in this mission.

Did you know that churches can carry spiritual baggage? Very often, it's a big old steamer trunk labeled "tradition." "That's the way we've always done it."

Tradition in the church is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it's a marvelous source of stability and connectedness with the past. There's nothing like a classic hymn that has stood the test of time, or the immortal words of institution from the Lord's Supper. Yet, on the other hand, tradition can get in the way of adapting ourselves to the demands of mission to a rapidly changing world.

During the French and Indian War, some British officers traveled through America's north country, followed by wagonloads of luxury items like fine china and wooden furniture. That was the way officers traveled along the paved roads of Europe -- but, along the Indian trails of upstate New York and Canada, this sort of baggage was ludicrous.

Traveling light on the journey of Christian discipleship sometimes requires us to leave certain beloved, but cumbersome, traditions behind. Traveling light sometimes requires us to leave behind what we've always done for new ways that speak to a new audience.

Unfortunately, that new audience doesn't always hear and doesn't always care about the message we bring or the way we do things. Jesus' next words trouble me. I don't like the idea of quitting. If no one is receptive to their teaching and healing, Jesus tells them to move on. If the people don't believe, nothing can happen. If the disciples are not welcome, they can feel free to move on to another place.

Power is a joint exercise between the teacher and the student, or between the leader and the group, or between the parent and the child. We often understand as power in those situations as traveling down from one party to the other, but without the collaboration of both, nothing can happen. Jesus learns that in his hometown, and the disciples live it out as they travel. Change is a dance between the leader and the community, between the pastor and the church, and between vision and belief. Without both sides, nothing happens.

Sunday after Sunday I get up before you and preach a sermon. Day after day, you try to live your lives as faithful disciples inviting others to know Jesus. But churches are shrinking, and the number of religious diminishes every day. Regular attendance at Sunday worship is no longer every Sunday. Now it's once a month or less. Hopefully, offering livestream of our worship services reaches the people we want to reach.

How does one handle rejection? What happens if the good news is rejected by those who are the intended hearers? One harsh reality the modern church must face is when people see and experience the best worship service a congregation can provide, and then respond, "Thanks, but no thanks. We will do something else next Sunday." Church leaders in smaller and medium sized congregations with traditional worship furniture and orders of service might face this reality every week. While many older Christians may have developed a "thick skin" to this reality, are the succeeding generations ready or willing to experience this as part of the *essence of worship*?

Jesus instructs His disciples, if, however, they are rejected by that village, they are to "shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." Clearly, shaking off the dust of a village as one leaves it is symbolic, but what does it symbolize? We cannot answer that question with any confidence, but among its possible meanings are these three: judgment on those who have rejected them, cleansing oneself of the defilement of Gentiles, and the acknowledgment that they have done all they can and are relieved of responsibility for the fate of the village.

Does this mean that we give up on Professing Members of the Church who no longer live out their membership promises of prayer, presence gifts, service, and witness? How do we ask why they no longer come to pray and worship with their Church? How many phone calls or visits do we make? Do people want to be accountable to each other?

The United Methodist Church, in her Book of Discipline, gives us a way of removing people from the roles of Professing Members and only the Church Conference can do that

after two years of listing their name and after two years of the Church Council doing all it can to bring them back into active membership. But membership may not even be seen as a value or the next step in a person's faith journey. There is a new reality of belonging and active participation. Perhaps it means that the days of Professing Membership are over and anyone who actively participates in the life of the Church should be considered "a member."

In Mark 6, Jesus models how Christians are to respond if rejected. When people of faith are rejected by one group of people, they are to move on. So, Jesus commissions his disciples to go out two by two, travelling light so they can stay at any place that welcomes them while in that town. If rejected, the disciples are to shake the dust off their feet and move onward to the next mission. Rejection does not hinder the ongoing mission as the disciples continued to "cast out many demons, and healed many sick people, anointing them with olive oil" (Mark 6:13). It does not mean that we give up on caring for those who are in need.

In sending the disciples out, Jesus again shows the shared nature of spiritual power. No one person is strong enough for this kind of spiritual work. Going in pairs, they can catch strength from each other and build up each other's courage. They are to care for each other and share the work. Neither one of the pair could be as effective alone as they are together. In sending out the disciples with the instructions He does, Jesus ensures that the focus will be on the message of healing and deliverance that the disciples bring – not on the disciples themselves.

We are sometimes called and sent to places where we would rather not go. We are sometimes sent to do things we would rather not do. On the other hand, sometimes there are times when our comfort zone (home) isn't comforting, but our would-be anxiety zone (the far country, or the strange and new) can become so. If the new and strange aren't comforting, they might prove to be gratifying and exhilarating. Take the challenge! Embark on a new adventure of faith!

Jesus sent out his disciples to do the work of telling good news. We are sent to do the same. First, we are called to offer and bring life wherever we go. We are then called to be a part of the church—a group sent forth to continue the example set by Jesus' disciples. In this, we must become known. People need to know that this church is a church that is inviting and welcoming, even to the point of accepting new ideas and thoughts and ways of doing things. The community needs to know that this church is a church focused on Jesus so they may know healing and the world can know the way of grace. Finally, all of our works are to the same end: bringing people to a place where grace is offered, and grace is received.