

Pentecost 8b, July 18, 2021

Mark 6 LFLC

I thought some context or background to the Gospel readings that we have heard over the past several weeks would be useful—especially since Mark’s Gospel in general, and Chapter 6 in particular, describes a Jesus who is always on the move. . . almost hurrying to be somewhere else or do something else.

And I want to begin with a couple of verses from two Sundays ago where Jesus goes to his hometown, experiences hostility and rejection, and then sends out his disciples two-by-two. . . a sending story that concludes with the beginning of this morning’s gospel reading where the disciples return from their journey and share their tales with Jesus about what they encountered, experienced and accomplished in his name and with his blessing.

Now, as we go through this overview today, we will discover another important event that is sandwiched between the sending and returning of the disciples-- but let’s begin our look at Mark’s stories with the first couple of verses of Chapter 6.

One day Jesus returns to his hometown for a visit after a fairly successful road trip throughout Galilee. Undoubtedly, everyone in Nazareth had not only heard about the spectacular things he’s been doing-- since that kind of news travels fast— but, even more, everyone in Nazareth knows him. . . and knows him well.

Incidentally, that is why he is often identified as “Jesus of Nazareth” rather than just “Jesus.” After all, the Hebrew name “Joshua” or “Jesus” in Greek was a common name and so “Nazareth” was tacked on to identify which Jesus he was: Jesus. . .of Nazareth. And in this passage, the identification gets even more specific— most likely because there are now other Joshuas or Jesuses in Nazareth, and so this one is singled out as “Mary’s son, the carpenter.”

Years before, he would have been known as “Joshua Josephson”—
 that is, “Jesus, son of Joseph”, but from the phrase “Mary’s son”,
 we can surmise that, sometime earlier, his father must have died
 leaving Jesus to take care of the family carpentry business
 along with taking of his mother and younger brothers and sisters.

In the first century, Nazareth wasn’t a large place—
 more like a village where perhaps 120-150 people lived
 with many of them being relatives and members
 of Jesus’ extended birth family.

In other words, in Nazareth, everyone knows everyone else,
 and everyone knows Jesus.

Although we have no details whatsoever, I think it is safe to assume
 that Jesus left Nazareth when he was about 30.

It is also reasonable to conclude that some who knew him
 said that he left because he had fallen under the influence
 of his older cousin, John--a fiery preacher who lived in the wilderness
 and baptized people in the River Jordan.

It may even be possible that, for a time, Jesus was a disciple
 or follower of John before his baptism by John.

But what we do know for sure from three of the Gospels is that,
 after his baptism, Jesus disappeared into the wilderness
 on some sort of vision quest or search for a divine revelation.

Most likely, some of those in Nazareth told others
 that Jesus had become a rabbi or a teacher
 with disciples of his own, and, together, as a group,
 they travelled the small villages and countryside of Galilee.

And I’m sure that they included the facts
 that he was quite famous for healing many people—
 making the lame walk and the blind see,
 becoming so popular that crowds gathered wherever he taught
 and many followed wherever he went.

Anyway, he had come back home now.

Most likely he stayed with his family members
 in the house that Joseph had built for them long ago.

And, on the Sabbath, he goes to the same synagogue
 he had always gone to with his father, and, as was the custom,
 the leaders or elders invite him to read and teach. . .and so he does.

But, when he comments on the passage he read—that is to say,
 when he preaches his first sermon in his hometown synagogue--
 his listeners are upset by what he says and begin to ask one another,
 “Where does he all that from?
 And just who does he think he is?
 Sure, he may be a bigshot everywhere else,
 but here he is just Mary’s son.”
 And Mark tells us that they were offended by him.

And, to be honest, such a negative response is not all that unusual—then or now.
 I mean, pretty much all religious people, to some degree or another,
 share the sense or opinion that “the truth has already been given to us,
 and so we know what we need to know and don’t need anything more,
 so thank you very much. . .and don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

Regardless, because of the rejection Jesus suffers,
 and because of the astonishing lack of faith in the people,
 Mark tells us that Jesus “could do no deed of power there”—
 that is, he could perform no miracles. . .
 “except he healed a few people” Mark adds.

Now, before judging the folks of Nazareth too harshly for their refusal to listen,
 maybe we ought to put ourselves in their places,
 and ask how quickly we think we would accept
 our next-door neighbour or one of our relatives
 challenging and confronting us like some old-time prophet of God.
 Would we listen? Or would we get our backs up too?

I mean, here we have Jesus telling his old neighbours back then. . .and us now. . .
 telling us to remember who we are. . .and whose we are—
 pushing us to think and respond in new ways. . .
 to take risks doing things we never did before. . .
 to care more, and love more, and give more, and be more
 than we ever imagined possible.

And so, it is no surprise that, like the people of Nazareth,
 we, too, so often say “No thanks!” to what he offers us and asks of us.
 And then, like those same people, we, too, wonder why
 nothing miraculous or dramatic or life-changing ever happens
 to us as individuals or to our congregations.

In describing why Jesus couldn’t work the same miracles
 in his hometown that he had done elsewhere,
 Barbara Brown Taylor says that Jesus was still the same Jesus,
 but that people, then and now, have to be open to him,
 open to being transformed by him.

It is, she says “like trying to light a match to a pile of wet sticks.
 Jesus holds the match until it burns out. . .while his family and friends
 sit a safe distance away shaking their heads back and forth.”

So, instead of working great wonders there,
 Jesus leaves his hometown never to return again—
 and hits the road “to let his light shine somewhere else.”
 And even more, Mark tells us, that not only does Jesus take his ministry
 of proclamation elsewhere, but he also instructs and sends out
 his followers to do the same—to be God’s agents
 at work in the world, utterly dependent upon God
 to provide all that they need when they need it.
 Or as he and we describe it in the Lord’s Prayer:
 “Give us today our bread for today. . .just enough for today.”

Someone once translated the words Jesus used to send out his disciples this way:
 “Don’t think you need a lot of extra equipment for this journey. . .
 because you are the equipment.”
 In other words, when we leave here to go out there,
 we carry with us and we carry within us all that we need,
 including, and especially, trust in the one who is sending us and leading us.

However, before we explore the idea of “trust” more intentionally and deeply,
 we need to note two more things about Mark’s stories
 in the first part of Chapter 6: First, inserted into his narrative
 about the sending and the returning of the disciples
 is the story of the death of John the Baptist—
 a story, we are told, that when Jesus hears about it, he is greatly saddened.

Now, to me anyway, it seems almost as if Mark suddenly remembers
the beheading of John and its effects on Jesus—

and then, equally suddenly, realizes that he has forgotten
to include it somewhere. . .and so he shoehorns it
into the middle of the hometown visit and sending stories.

I mean, the disciples mention nothing about John's death upon their return—
something almost impossible to imagine.

So, at least according to Mark's timeline,
it appears that Jesus is by himself when he gets that awful news
and therefore has to deal with the horror of the story
and the sadness and the loss all by himself. . .along with the realization
that what happened to John for "speaking the truth to power"
will very likely happen to him as well. . .and maybe someday soon.
A lot of sorrow and, perhaps even a lot of fear and trembling,
for someone to process all by oneself. . .
along with a lot of praying for the trust he will need
to face what is sure to come when it comes.

Now, I am highlighting this business of "trust"
because it is no secret to anyone here today
that there are and always will be a lot of people "out there"
who shut out our message to them of God's love in Christ
because it doesn't match our attitudes, our words and our deeds.

In other words, to a lot of folks—church people. . .people like us--
we are nothing but judgmental hypocrites,
saying one thing and doing. . .and being. . .another.

Look, it is no secret to any of you listening to my words today
that Christianity in the west is in deep trouble.

In North America alone, almost half of adults
have left the religion of their youth. . .
and most of them for no religion at all.

In Europe, many grand cathedrals and basilicas are more
like museums or mausoleums than thriving centres of worship.
All across the northern and western parts of the world,
people are leaving the embrace of mother church in droves—
especially among those under 40 years of age.

And, in my estimation, the central problem behind the decline of the church
isn't secularism or pluralism or multiculturalism

or the lack of a good bass guitarist in the worship band.

The problem is one of trust.

More and more people simply don't trust the church anymore. . .
and, really, why would they?

The Roman Catholic Church has been embroiled for decades now
in the child sexual abuse scandal, including the recent, shocking
and troubling news about what happened in residential schools—
scandals which have not only uncovered
thousands of pedophile priests around the world
but have also revealed that members of the church hierarchy
protected such priests instead of protecting the children being abused.

And now we are discovering. . .or uncovering. . .the truth
that nuns and sisters of many different religious orders carried out
physical and emotional abuse of children as well
leaving generations of broken and suffering adults in their wake.

We also hear too often about evangelical and fundamentalist pastors
who rail loudly and fervently against homosexuality as a terrible sin
and then get caught visiting male prostitutes or found guilty
of stalking and grooming boys in their youth groups.

And we have high-profile church leaders across the globe
who make insane pronouncement declaring that hurricanes, droughts,
floods, wildfires and other natural disasters. . .
as well as viruses and sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS--
that such things are the result of pre-marital sex and abortions. . .

or declaring that those practicing sexual or gender "deviations"
should be institutionalized in fenced camp settings. . .
or that teenagers who seem to be "gay" or act "gay"
or think they are gay or that their genders are wrong—
that such young people should be subjected to "conversion therapy"
which involve intensive and long-term "counselling,
marathon prayer sessions, even physical punishments
as well as electro-shock treatments. . .until they repent and change,
not only their behaviours, but their very orientation and identity.

And, of course there are those examples of evangelists
 “needing” to buy and own and use private jets on their “crusades”
 because God has told them that they shouldn’t travel with sinners.
 Given all of that. . .and much more. . .who in their right mind
 would trust the church to guide their children
 let alone give spiritual counsel to adults in crisis?

Truthfully, the fact that *anyone* trusts us these days is really quite remarkable—
 which means that if the institutional church is going to survive at all—
 let alone flourish—there are some changes that have to be made
 before people will begin to trust us again.

And the first thing that needs to happen is that,
 as a whole body, as the whole church,
 we need to fall on our knees in repentance and confess publicly
 that we have done terrible things in the past,
 and, to our shame, continue to do so in present.
 In other words, we need to stop being so defensive
 and start being honest and transparent.

Second, we need to remember “Who” it is that we as church represent.
 So, before we open our mouths to say something judgemental
 or make a decision about how to treat someone else,
 especially those Glenn listed in his sermon last week—
 the poor, the outcasts, the ignored, the shamed and shunned--
 we need to realize that when we look bad, we make God look bad too.

So the answer to gaining peoples’ trust is not to update our websites
 or provide Starbucks coffee and free wireless at our Sunday services.
 Instead, the only way people will even *consider* listening
 to anything we have to say is we act
 like the kind of Christians we claim to be—
 that is, genuinely Christlike: welcoming, accepting, loving, caring,
 compassionate, and most of all, real.

Third, we need to help people inside and outside the church
 remember that it is not we who are ever-faithful, but God.
 God is our rock, our redeemer and our refuge. . .
 and God will not let us down.

Our trust is in God. . .and not in the church. . .not even in the Bible.

After all, Jesus encountered all kinds of people who knew
and quoted Scripture to him. . .at him and against him. . .
and who eventually succeeded using their religious status and clout
to put him to death for telling them and showing them
that they were wrong about their judgemental, fearsome,
angry and exclusive God—and for his declaring to them
in word and deed that God not only loved and loves the world
but that God sent the Son to save and not condemn the world.

The liturgical colour for the long season
called “Sundays after Pentecost” is green—
the colour of growth. . .growth in faith and in discipleship.
Now, no one will choose to be a disciple
unless they have faith or trust in their leader;
and a leader worth trusting is a leader worth following.

Thus, faith or trust is not so much believing
that certain ideas or teachings or doctrines are true
but trust is rather relying on Jesus promise to us
that we are his and that he is and will be with us
no matter what. . .or where. . .no when. . .or who we are.

And, then, fortified by our trust in that promise, to follow him
by loving and serving our neighbours. . .and sharing the message
of the good news with those we meet along the road—
the good news of God’s love for us and for all,
in and through and because of this Jesus of Nazareth,
this son of Mary—our Saviour, Friend and Lord—

the one who is the Bread of Life, Bread for the World,
the Bread from Heaven, who comes once more this morning
to feed us with his own life and to equip and strengthen us
for the journey ahead.

Amen.

SDG