

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Mark 6:1-13 (NRSV)

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. [2] On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! [3] Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. [4] Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." [5] And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. [6] And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. [7] He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. [8] He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; [9] but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. [10] He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. [11] If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." [12] So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. [13] They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

HANDS ON

If you want something done right, do it yourself. Isn't that true?

Many people believe that. In fact some folks pride themselves in a "hands on" approach to management. He knows every task and is willing to get down in the trenches and work with the rest of the troops.

That can be a good approach, even an inspiring approach. This past week on the history channel I learned that this is what made George Washington such an effective leader. He literally got down in the trenches with his men and often led the charge against the enemy when his troops were in disarray.

But, there's a down side to the hands on approach. Someone said this of a boss who used this "hands on" approach, "It's a simple matter of trust. He doesn't trust anybody. That's why he has to do everything himself." Every management style has a down side, and this is the down side to the hands on approach.

There comes a time when you must trust people. You must give them their instructions and then let them go and do the task on their own.

NOT READY FOR MINISTRY

The second half of today's lesson is about how Jesus did just that. He chose disciples, disciples that were as far as we know not particularly qualified in any way, trained them and then sent them out to preach the gospel.

What a strange way to bring in the kingdom of God. In the gospel of Mark the disciples are often being warned not to tell anyone about Jesus. Their understanding of who he is and what he has come to do is incomplete.

So why in the world is Jesus sending them out on mission in the middle of Mark's story? They're not ready. They're not fully trained. In fact they don't seem to have a clue about the kingdom.

In the Presbyterian Church we believe in a professionally trained ministry. We require our candidates for the ministry to have a four year degree from college and spend three or four years in seminary. We make them take comprehensive tests on the Bible, theology and church polity. We train them in pastoral care and subject them to psychological testing.

And yet, as a former member of our Presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry, I can say that with most candidates I had the sneaking suspicion that they weren't ready. Oh yes, they were bright, committed people who loved Jesus and had a genuine call to the ministry.

But, I knew what was "out there." And they didn't. I sometimes thought to myself, "They are like sheep going to the slaughter."

But, I have come to realize that none of us are really prepared for what we will find out there. No matter how much time we spend in study there will always be that unexpected turn. It is not possible to be fully prepared.

THE CALL

But, this passage seems to suggest that this is not important. The most important thing is not our ability but being called by Jesus to do the job.

Did you notice the first half of our lesson for today? It's the story of Jesus preaching in his home town of Nazareth. And it didn't go so well.

The home town folks said, "We know this guy. We know his momma and his daddy. We remember when he was in diapers. Who is he to tell us anything?"

And the Scripture says that although Jesus was able to do many miracles in other places, he couldn't do much in his home town. Instead of the people being amazed by the power of God in Jesus, Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith.

In Mark's gospel this is what precedes commissioning the disciples to go out and preach the gospel; it is Jesus' biggest failure so far. If the people didn't listen to Jesus in his home town why did Jesus think that strangers might listen to ill trained disciples in a different place?

It is amazing that Jesus called his ill prepared and rather dense disciples to go and preach, and it's equally amazing that his disciples were willing to go out on their own after seeing Jesus fail in such a spectacular way.

But, perhaps it shouldn't surprise us so much. We've always believed that the most important part of discipleship is not our ability or our desire. The most important part of discipleship is the call of God in Christ.

Jesus says "come" and we go. We might call it divine delegation. Jesus gives unqualified disciples an impossible job to do.

And where angels fear to tread, we go. Like those first disciples we say “yes” to God’s call. Here I am Lord, send me.

And so we go with God.

Our only qualification is that we were chosen, commissioned and equipped by Christ.

And we seem to be a particularly bad choice.

GOD CALLS THE FOOLISH

You might wonder why God is such a terrible personnel manager, calling disciples who are ill equipped to do the job. My favorite explanation of this is found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

As most of you remember, the Corinthians thought they were “all that” when it came to matters of faith. They were sure that they knew more about the faith than anyone else. They bragged about their leaders, and they bragged about their church.

Paul responded to their pride by writing something like this,

“Do you really think that you have a reason to brag? How many of you were smart or rich or of noble birth before you entered the church? Not many. Do you know why God called you to be disciples of Jesus Christ? Do you really want to know?

God has a sense of humor! God called nobodies like you to do this job so that you wouldn’t have reason to brag. He wanted everyone to see that the kingdom is not dependent upon the power of men and women. It’s dependent upon the power of God.”

(See 1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

Some would say that God needs to delegate jobs to us because he has no other choice. He “has no hands but our hands” as the old saying goes.

But, I would suggest that God delegates jobs to us in order to prove that the power comes from above and not from below. God wants people to say,

“Wow, if those untrained fishermen from Galilee can preach and teach and heal, God must be in it.”

HOME TOWN RELUCTANCE

The big problem with most of us is that we know each other too well ... or at least we think that we do. We think that we know the strengths and weaknesses of those that are close to us. And we think that we know ourselves.

And we use that knowledge to limit the possibilities. We think that God couldn't possibly use us to preach and teach and heal. We don't have those talents. We don't have that training.

But, you know what? The call of God doesn't depend upon us and our abilities. It depends upon God's choice. And God still has a sense of humor when it comes to his choices! And we are the proof!

The only thing that can stop the power of God in Christ is lack of faith by people who think that they already know Jesus. The home town folks, the people who are most familiar with Jesus are the ones who sometimes prevent the message from going out.

Are we the home town folks? Are we the ones who think that we know Jesus so well that we are unable or unwilling to be surprised by something new?

The only thing that can prevent us from moving forward is the mistaken view that God can't work in our particular situation. We know these people, and we know the Jesus we worship. Surely he wouldn't call us to go out and do something different?!

And yet the message of the gospel seems to suggest just the opposite. The call of Jesus is always the call to do something bold, something unexpected. The call of Jesus requires us to rethink our lifestyle and what is really necessary for our journey.

TRAVELING LIGHT

What do you bring when you go on a trip? I know what we bring. Everything! At least it seems that way.

We're going on a trip this coming week, and we have multiple lists of things to do and remember. I often get so discouraged with the preparation and the expense of it all that I just want to stay home.

There's a wonderful new commercial out on TV where the family loads up SUV with camping equipment. The dad asks the family, "Are you ready to go camping?" And they shout, "Yes." He backs out of his driveway into the neighbor's yard, and says, "We're here!"

I can really identify with feeling. It seems like such a hassle to go somewhere else that maybe it would just be better to stay at home (or at least just camp in the neighboring yard.)

And it is that kind of attitude that often prevents us from responding positively to the call of God in Christ. Sometimes I think we get so involved in preparing for the mission trip that we never actually take it.

Did you notice what Jesus asked his disciples to bring on their missionary journey? Not much.

In fact his packing list was more about what they were to leave behind than what they were to take. Jesus told his disciples, "Don't take an extra tunic, don't take any bread, don't take any money, and don't take a suitcase."

Now even I could follow that packing list! Jesus doesn't want his disciples to be bogged down by any extra baggage.

And I think that he tells us the same thing. Responding to the call of God in Christ is about trusting in God to provide.

The call of Jesus is the call to leave everything behind. Too much baggage can weigh us down and prevent us from taking the trip. Jesus wants us to travel light.

SHAKE OFF THE DUST

And there's one piece of "luggage" that Jesus especially wants us to leave behind. It is an undue concern with results. In verse 11 Jesus tells his disciples, "If any place does not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

I've always found this verse to be troubling. Is this the same Jesus who tells about the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep in order to find the one who is lost? Is this the same Jesus who tells the story about the father who waits upon the prodigal until at last he comes home?

How could Jesus tell his disciples to shake off the dust and move on?

Maybe we need to make a distinction here. God never gives up, but sometimes God requires us to give up. Sometimes God requires the disciples to just accept the fact that the message has fallen on deaf ears.

Jesus talks about persistence, but he also talks about the inevitability of rejection as well.

Remember the parable of the sower where some of the good seed fell on bad ground and refused to take root?

The Bible is filled with stories of those who rejected God's word. In fact, our passage for today is framed by two stories of rejection, the rejection of Jesus by his hometown of Nazareth and the rejection of God's prophet, who was beheaded for his faithful stand against Herod.

The crucifixion of Jesus demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that people can reject the gospel in the most forceful way possible, by killing the messenger.

Jesus warned his disciples about this. He told them, "If they treat me this way, do you think that they will treat you any differently?"

I, like many of you, have always wanted people to like me. I want to please people and do what they want.

But, over the years I have come to believe that in order to preach the gospel it is necessary to say things that people don't want to hear. In order to preach the gospel it is necessary to leave my desire to please others at home.

If we're going to follow Jesus, sometimes we have to just keep on moving when the message is rejected.

Professor Walter Brueggemann wrote that those of us who tell the story of the Bible should not "beg or coerce" but "state the options and require decision." We trust not in our own power to persuade but in the power of God's word.

A SUMMER INTERNSHIP

When I was in seminary we listened to sermons composed by fellow students. I remember one sermon that was based on this passage entitled, "Jesus Sends His Disciples on a Summer Internship." We could all identify with that sermon.

You see, after our first year in seminary, we went out to serve a church under the supervision of a more experienced pastor. They told us that this was so we could find out early on if the ministry was for us. And if it wasn't then we could make other vocational plans.

Like those first disciples whom Jesus sent out on mission, we were so unprepared. There was so much that we didn't understand.

I can still recall the panic in one student's voice when she asked, "Suppose the real pastor is on vacation and someone dies? I don't even know how to do a funeral."

The teacher smiled and pointed to the Worshipbook. She said, "They won't worry about the fact that this is your first funeral. Just read this." Somehow this was not the encouragement we were looking for at that point.

But, we all went out. We all did things that we were not prepared to do. Sometimes things went well despite our inexperience. And sometimes things did not go so well. But, in that brief summer we made a beginning. We learned to let go and go and in God's name.

We didn't take much with us. We had no degree, very little confidence and limited knowledge. But, in most cases we found that what we took was enough.

GO ANYWAY

One reason that we are often hindered in our ministry together is the very realistic evaluation that what we have is not enough. The job is too great for us. We're not smart enough. We're not compassionate enough. We're not faithful enough.

And we're afraid that someone else will find this out. So we stay home, hoping that no one will notice. We stay at home so that no one will have an opportunity to reject us or any message that we might bring.

But, Jesus tells his disciples, "Go anyway. The message is stronger than your fears and weaknesses. Say these words. You will be amazed at the results."

Those first disciples were indeed amazed at the results of their first mission trip. People were cured of what ailed them, and the power of God was seen throughout the land.

And I continue to be amazed at what God can do through ordinary men and women like you and me today. God has delegated some important work for each of us to do.

Now it's true that God could do it Himself. But, God has chosen us to be his representatives, his ambassadors.

Our God is a great delegator. Our God trusts ordinary people like you and me to bring God's human touch to this world.

I wonder.

What is God calling us to do?

Where is God calling us to go?

Can we leave everything behind and follow?

God help us have faith for the journey.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN