

# “Sent as Disciples”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – February 9, 2020*

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Psalm 122

Mark 6:1-13

Mark positions these two stories after a string of three miraculous healings in chapter five: Jesus drives out a legion of demons; then heals a woman with a hemorrhage and raises the daughter of Jairus from the dead. In these stories, Jesus demonstrated his great power on both sides of the Sea of Galilee: Gentile and Jewish. All who witnessed his power were amazed. Thus, you might expect that the people of Jesus’ hometown – to whatever extent that they have heard about these miracles – would have good reason to be proud, and welcome Jesus back with a ticker-tape parade; but they don’t.

We’re told that on the Sabbath, Jesus and the disciples following him go the synagogue where he taught the people of his small hometown; likely including his own family members. The synagogue would have been central to the religious and social life of the community; and teaching would have been central to synagogue activity. In a time when many people could not read and did not have access to holy scrolls, hearing the scriptures read and expounded in the synagogue was their primary way of learning their religious heritage. However, Mark’s Gospel will not tell us of another occasion where Jesus teaches in a synagogue. Hereafter, he will only teach in houses. For, although Jesus has experienced opposition before: from demons, religious authorities; this is the first time that ordinary religious people reject him; and it happens in his hometown, in the very congregation where he was raised.<sup>1</sup>

Notice the questions the people have for Jesus: where did he get his wisdom and power? Is he not just a carpenter, the son of Mary, the sibling of those sitting there in the pews? They seemingly cannot get past the fact that they know him and know from where and from who he has come. They seem to be offended that Jesus has upended their preconceived notions about his identity, which they thought could be summed up by his occupation and family connections. As the oldest child, he might have been expected to have stay home to provide for his mother, Mary – who may have been a widow by this time – not to become an itinerant teacher with no pillow on which to lay his head.

In response to their questions, Jesus says, “prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” By

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Donovan from *Sermon Writer*

applying this proverb to himself, Jesus implies that he is, indeed, a prophet – and not just a carpenter and a son, brother, or neighbor – and that the people of Nazareth are guilty of rejecting him just as the people of Israel have so often rejected God’s prophets. And while Jesus noted the faith of all involved in the healings of chapter five, here he is astonished by the unbelief of the people who had known him best.

The rejection at Jesus’ hometown synagogue did not hinder the mission for long. In fact, it may have given impetus to the commissioning of the twelve for their first assignment. This was why Jesus had chosen the disciples in chapter three. Since that point, they were prepared for their own mission: witnessing both the power of Jesus amid faith and unexpected rejection in the midst of unbelief.

Sent out in pairs, the disciples were instructed to continue ministry in households, not in the synagogues of surrounding villages. They were told to travel light; trusting in God and the people they would meet to care for them; not setting an unequal power dynamic that the ‘haves’ are coming to save the ‘have nots.’ They are instructed to stay in one home for the duration of the visit; not looking to trade up to a better place, but focusing their entire attention on those who are in front of them. And finally, Jesus tells them not to be surprised if they encounter rejection, but to shake off the dust and let it go; that they need not imagine they have to stay somewhere they are not wanted or welcome.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus faced rejection and unbelief and he knows the disciples will face the same. Not everyone will accept the good news they have to offer. As ambassadors for Jesus, sometimes we also will be welcomed and other times rejected. We could spend our time hoping or imagining that we are supposed to be in unwelcoming places, that it’s God’s will; or we could presume that because some were not ready to accept us, then nobody will, so why bother trying? Jesus never said being a disciple would be easy.

The first of the seven marks of church vitality that we will be discussing over these weeks is Lifelong Discipleship Formation. As Christ’s followers, we gather together in order to prepare ourselves – and one another – for those times when we will be sent out as ambassadors for Jesus. In our effort to be prepared for this mission, we seek to learn from Jesus: who he welcomed, how he lived, and what he taught. This will be a lifelong process – from the cradle to the grave – as we are always being formed and re-formed based on our experiences; and the people and places to which God will bring us.

Maybe one of the reasons that we sometimes have trouble accepting the label of disciple is a fear of rejection: that by claiming this is who we are as God’s people, we open ourselves to skepticism, suspicion, scorn or outright opposition. In other

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<sup>2</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

parts of the gospel, Jesus warns that his disciples are being sent like lambs among wolves, or like laborers into a harvest where the workers are few. That can be scary.

In addition, we might bristle at the idea of being sent out on the road without any money or extra clothes. Would we be allowed to take credit cards; a cell phone? While its true that we live in a different culture of hospitality – that today it would be naïve, if not unsafe, to expect someone in a strange town to invite us in to stay with them – there is also something to be learned about the faith required for being sent out, even if we do not feel fully equipped or prepared. A part of our faith formation, then, is to make ourselves ready to adapt to different situations; to recognize the gift in what others have to offer, even if it's not what we would have chosen ourselves. As disciples, we are sometimes called to serve, but also to allow ourselves to be welcomed; to be the recipients – and not always the givers – of gracious hospitality.<sup>3</sup>

And so, a part of our discipleship formation involves taking us out of our comfort zones in order to grow and, eventually, have more opportunities to serve others. This is one of the reasons why – although some have probably wondered – there has never been a limit placed on how long we devote to passing the peace. Sure, some visitors might see friendly chit-chat as an odd aspect of worship; and the introverts among us – myself included – might have to sit down after greeting two dozen fellow congregants; but it still is good training for us to be extravagant in our welcoming. In the same vein, we make sure to expose our young people through service projects and mission trips to situations where they must adapt according to where they are and who they encounter. If we are to be truly ready to enter the households and lives of others, it takes practice.

But, again, discipleship formation is not just for children or beginners. Whether in bible study, personal devotion, group discussion, corporate worship, congregational fellowship, or mission and service; we continuously learn and grow by patterning our lives after the example of Jesus. This is lifelong work, because we are never certain where or when God is going to call us to be sent; whether to somewhere new, or in some new way to somewhere we know well. And while there are advantages to partnership – like working in pairs – it may not always be possible or appropriate for us to go out two-by-two. And yet, even when alone, we can remember that the entire body – our sisters and brothers in Christ – stand behind us and beside us. None of us can be formed in the faith – and fight off all the forces that would draw us toward unbelief – alone.

So, the first mark of a vital church – the first signpost that helps orient us along our faith journeys – is that we are disciples of Jesus: lifelong learners who have been and are constantly being formed by God and the people, places and experiences we encounter. We don't know at the time how these various learnings will come into

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<sup>3</sup> Emerson Powery from *WorkingPreacher.com*

play down the road. When might the day come that disciples are called to provide welcome to a stranger, or pray with someone who is in crisis, or offer hope to someone stuck in grief? When will we find ourselves without the money bag or extra coat that we might be comfortable offering, and need to draw instead on different resources to show the good news of God's gracious love?

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to be active participants in the healing of the world; living as though we can change the world; even if in seemingly small ways. This does not mean that we must mold other people in our own image, or to what we might imagine Jesus desires of us. Instead, we are to enter into their lives in much the same way the original twelve disciples, sent out by Jesus in pairs, entered into the homes of people in the surrounding villages: humbly and respectfully, empowered by faith, ready to both give and receive, but knowing that not everyone is ready or willing to believe.

Just remember, if you are going to shake the dust off your feet, do it after you leave the house. As Jesus taught, we are sent out to serve, not to be served. We may be Christ's disciples, engaged in a life-long process of faith formation and service to others, but no-one should have to clean up after us when we're gone. Amen.