

“Sending”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 11, 2024

6th Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 67

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 6:7-13

Introduction

The readers of Mark’s gospel are constantly being asked to answer the question: *Who is this Jesus?* One of his primary identities is as rabbi: a teacher in the Jewish tradition, one with followers (or disciples) who are watching, listening to, and learning his ways. Jesus provided several different means of instruction. First, he interpreted the Jewish Law: commenting on the rules, rituals and traditions of his Jewish faith such as fasting and prayer. Second, he taught through parables: using the stuff of everyday life – like last week’s parable a Sower planting seeds – to reveal what this new way of living in God’s kingdom is like. And third, he taught by example: welcoming strangers, healing diseases, casting out demons, feeding the hungry, and encouraging his disciples to, then, do the same.

In this morning’s reading, Jesus sends out his disciples – the twelve but, possibly, others as well – to go in pairs to the surrounding neighborhoods and villages, to share this good news about the coming kingdom of God. Here, Jesus instructs them through experiential learning; they are called to immerse themselves in mission; to put these powers and practices they have been witnessing into action.

Read Mark 6:7-13

I don’t know if you ever have missionaries come to your front door. One of the reasons people move to places like Bainbridge, Auburn, Newbury, or South Russell is to protect their privacy; to make it less likely – whether because of legal restrictions or mere inconvenience – that people will show up on your porch trying to sell you something, physical or spiritual. In higher population density areas, it is more likely that a salesperson, someone with a petition, or a pair of young Mormon missionaries will knock on your door.

It's hard for us to imagine, then, that what Jesus instructs his disciples to do here would be a very good missionary strategy for our context, today. It's not likely that a pair of strangers showing up in sandals, with no money or extra clothes, would be invited – as hospitable as we might imagine our community to be – to come in to eat and stay for a while.

Times were different in Jesus' day from how they are now – expectations about proper hospitality were certainly not the same – but, it is clear that Jesus intends his followers to take to their immersive learning project with an attitude of vulnerability. The disciples are sent to practice dependence on the hospitality of the neighbor just as Israel was dependent on the hospitality of God in the desert: traveling lightly, risking being accepted or rejected by their neighbors, and risking being changed by God.¹

Thus, there are specific instructions from Jesus about what to take, and what to leave at home. Jesus tells them to take a staff and to wear sandals – presumably to protect from predators and blistered feet – but to leave behind extra clothes and money. These are not the kind of mission trips that require lots of fundraising, food reserves, or medical supplies. Instead, the focus seems to be on giving and receiving hospitality; encouraging his followers to practice the ministries of presence, healing, and anointing by, literally, laying hands on them.

Again, in our culture that values privacy, these instructions may cause us discomfort. We might be more familiar with having something to give, following a more structured agenda or time frame for our missions. But, keep in mind, Jesus is sending out his followers not just to the poor or sick or lonely, but to their own neighbors, in an effort to share a message that its listeners never would have heard before. There was no church for them to be a representative of; their only identity would have been as disciples – immersive learners – of this rabbi named Jesus.

Sending them out two-by-two – apart from being, as AJ Levine points out, an allusion to the animals on Noah's Ark – makes one less vulnerable to assault on the road and more able to help each other in the tasks of pulling away thorns or providing necessary fertilizer. “When,” Levine says, “our confidence flags or our body tells us we cannot go farther, that companion can carry us spiritually or even physically.”²

¹ Alan Roxburg, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time*

² Amy-Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner's Guide to the Good News*, p. 30

Jesus prepared his disciples for potential rejection. If they were not welcome in a home or village, they were to shake the dust from their sandals before leaving as a visible demonstration that their work there was finished. “Sometimes,” Levine also says, “when your words are not welcome, there is nothing you can do, other than to say ‘bye-bye’ and move on. If folks are not going to listen to the message, no reason for missionaries either to harass or beat their heads against the wall.”³

Thus, if we are willing to look under the specific instructions about where to go, what to take and what to leave home, how to introduce and comport ourselves, and how to communicate that our mission is done; if we are willing to, instead, simply consider ourselves immersive learners to Jesus’ teaching, then what can we take from today’s passage about our own mission enterprise; the ways that we are sent out into the world as followers of this rabbi named Jesus?

First, discipling is not meant to be done alone. While there is immense potential impact in one-on-one encounters – whether in visitation, counseling, or mentoring – each of these actions require support systems behind the scenes. Proper discernment for directions in ministry takes a team: to offer protection, to share the load, to uplift, support, and keep each other honest. Though we tend to place leaders and charismatics on pedestals, Paul best describes the church as a body of different members, and none should say to any other part that they are not necessary.

Second, the idea of being sent out by Jesus reminds us that not everyone feels or has been welcome in the church. Unlike in Jesus’ time, most people today have deep and personal connections to and impressions about organized religion and the Christian faith in general and congregations in particular. What we might call and consider a sanctuary can be frightening, intimidating, or even triggering to others. And so, Jesus reminds us, hospitality needs to be a two-way street. If we are only willing to be the host and experience nothing foreign, we may never move beyond our own comfort zones; we might miss out on the rich tapestry of our communities and world.

Third, discipling requires the willingness, if not always the practice, of traveling light. When the objective is to share this good news of God’s kingdom – a different way of living and being – then sometimes the stuff we cling to – traditions, buildings, creeds – can get in the way. With less to carry, we can focus more on the exchange of stories and hospitality; more freely sharing, giving and

³ Levine, p. 34

receiving; allowing the immersive practices of learning to lead us into taking some risks, trying new things, widening our perspectives.

And finally, we learn from Jesus the absolute importance of human touch. This particular mission enterprise is about visiting homes in neighborhoods, sitting together at tables, offering fellowship, and providing health care. Jesus is sending his disciples into their own communities to meet and, if they are welcomed, create deeper relationships with their neighbors. The church, today, engages in lots of different kinds of missionary work: sending trained specialists around the world, setting up schools and hospitals in faraway lands, even lobbying in congress and statehouses. Some of the work of the church is in traditional forms of evangelism: sharing the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ with people and in lands where the gospel has never been proclaimed. But there is also a place for face-to-face ministry; walking with and alongside the people we encounter in our schools, workplaces, and public spaces; whoever they are, whatever their preferred faith, or even no faith; being the Christ that we know to others.

Who is this Jesus? Mark's gospel reveals him to be a rabbi who teaches his followers in many ways. One of these instructive methods is an immersive experience: sending them out to share – and to embody – the good news of the kingdom of God; that there is a different way of living: one of healing, compassion, peace, welcome, and wholeness. And this kingdom comes to pass when we follow Jesus' call to travel light and take the risk to be neighbor to each other.

For, as the 16th century St. Teresa of Avila said:

*Christ has no body on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless others now.*⁴

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ As quoted by Micheal Rogness from *WorkingPreacher.com*