

First Presbyterian Church – Lynchburg, VA

July 7, 2024

“Witnessing Ain’t Easy” by Rev. Dr. Nancy Dawson

Mark 6:1-13

We are continuing this week in the Gospel of Mark, today reading from 6th chapter verses 1 – 13. Jesus has been traveling to various town and cities around the Sea of Galilee.

Two weeks ago, Peter preached on the Story of Jesus and his disciples crossing the sea when a great windstorm arose while Jesus was sleeping in the stern of the boat. His disciple woke him for fear of drowning. And Jesus got up and calmed the storm with 3 words – peace be still!

While the scriptures don’t say so directly, I am certain that word got out among the people in the region about yet another miracle that Jesus performed. Remember, this is 1st century Palestine and there were no cellphones, no text messages, snap chat, twitter, e-mails, fax machine or landlines (I am dating myself here). But back then word of mouth was quite efficient.

By the time we read our scripture last week great crowds were already following Jesus. And the number of people swelled to even larger crowds when they heard that Jesus had cured a woman who had suffered from disease for 12 years and a little girl who was dying was restored to life.

Today we find Jesus and his disciples in Nazareth – Jesus’ hometown and like our previous reading this passage consists of two stories. These stories are not exactly sandwiched together, but they do have similar themes and topics.

Listen now for God’s Holy Word from Mark 6: 1-13

Jesus is "on the move." The gossip mill is working overtime. And he’s coming home, can you believe it! And his hometown folks can't wait to see him.

‘So what are you doing?’, his friends ask him when they meet him on the street. For Jesus it was easy to answer, *‘Come to Synagogue on the Sabbath and see.’* And they did.

Friends, neighbors, townsfolk who had hired him as a carpenter when he worked with his dad, Men he had gone to school with when they were boys, his siblings and other extended family. They were all there.

There he was the local boy come home with wisdom beyond his years and the temerity to teach new insights and understandings. He probably knew that the people who had stayed in backwater Nazareth were there because they didn’t like things that were new, or different. But he had hoped.

There is quite a bit of family information here that shows above all else that these really are Jesus’ own people who know him and his family very well. We can picture Jesus' hometown family and friends squirming in their synagogue seats and craning their necks to see if he's

coming up the center aisle as they wait for his arrival that day. The hometown boy is coming to bring the morning message. And he's bringing his followers with him as well. They think they're waiting for the boy who knows how to make the best shelves in town. They think they're waiting for the familiar sibling of James, Joses, Judas, Simon, and his sisters. They think they're waiting for the obedient son of Mary.

As his family and former neighbors sit waiting, you can imagine they were preparing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps they were saying to each other, "Even if he's not that good a speaker, we need to encourage him, because he's just getting started."

They're prepared to excuse the shortcomings of someone safe and familiar who is from where they live and is known by all of them. And they are willing to listen to him as long as he doesn't say anything unexpected or challenging.

Suddenly, here he is striding down the aisle of the synagogue. Mark, with his usual taciturnity, simply tells us that "Jesus began to teach." The congregation's response to whatever it was he said reflects a combination of belief and incredulity.

They seem to believe that what he said was of divine origin "What is this wisdom that has been given to him?" Yet they are unable to believe that such a great gift would be given to someone they know and whose family they know.

What deeds of power are being done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter? Is not his family here with us? How dare he have something we don't? How could something this powerful have grown up in our midst and we not know about it? How dare God send such astounding teachings and do such deeds of power this close to home through someone we know? They were amazed and then jealous. And so, they took offense at him.

And Jesus replies with a proverbial expression - a prophet has no honor in his hometown or among his or her own people. And Jesus was amazed at their unbelief.

Now we can look back at this story and try to guess how we might have responded. Many of us probably think that if we had been one of Jesus' hometown folks, we would have gladly heard him and changed our ways in anyway he was encouraging us to change. Truth be told we shall never know what we would have done then.

The question for today is what am I going to do now? What are you going to do now? When Jesus was rejected in Nazareth, he did not--though it must have been painful for him--reject them in turn. He did not take offense. He only sadly shook his head and then moved on.

First, he leaves his hometown and went about the villages teaching. And then he calls his disciples to himself and prepares them to go out and teach and heal. Don't go in power and pretense, he says. Rather be with people in vulnerable simplicity. No fancy clothes, food, money, nor weapons.

And then he gives them a simple instruction. Stay with those who are receptive And depart from those who will not welcome you or receive what you have to say. And if you are not received, shake the dust from your feet as a witness against them.

Jesus is preparing his disciples and us for the fact that not everyone wants to take the leap of faith to believe he is the Son of God. And not everyone is willing to follow him along the hard and narrow path of discipleship.

And not everyone is willing to allow Jesus to work deeds of power through them. There will be those who refuse to welcome and hear him.

The disciples took Jesus' marching orders to heart. And they proclaimed that all should repent – a radical change for everyone who listened. The disciples did, just that and the kingdom grew and grew.

I wonder if we can recapture the heart winning, soul changing simplicity those early apostles exhibited. Like Jesus, the disciples were called to live a prophetic and itinerant life on the margins of society. And like Jesus they are to confront the power of evil and call people to repentance and conversion.

During my career in doing Presbytery work and providing consulting help to scores of churches, I became profoundly aware that the churches that remained vital or that regained vitality were those who believed passionately that the Bible is not a list of rules and regulations, though there are commandments to live by

It is instead it is a sweeping saga of the ministry of God – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And that God's message to us throughout the Scriptures is that ... 'I am God and you're not. "I am God and you're not."

This may sound kind of silly perhaps, but I don't think it is. The truth is it's not about me, or you, or us. It's about God. The difference between the religious faithful in Nazareth and those whom Jesus and the disciples met on their mission journeys, was that those in the surrounding towns and villages turned to God maybe for the first time or maybe with a sense of renewal.

They acknowledge their own need for salvation, healing and for change. They sought to know God and God's power in new ways. And because of their humility, courage, and trust they were willing to take risks in their faith.

May it be so for me and for you.

Amen