

We join with the larger church today reflecting on the lectionary reading of Scripture.

Our reading comes from the Gospel of Mark chapter 6 1-13. Listen now to God's word for us this day.

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On 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! ³Is 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. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

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

Welcome

Our New Testament text this morning is composed of two brief scenes. The first Jesus has entered his hometown. He has returned to well-worn paths and familiar faces. The text simply says "he left that place". You have to ask the question well where did he come from. In the previous chapters you see Jesus crisscrossing the

Sea of Galilee. He heals a man unable to walk in Capernaum, he calms a storm over the sea, he heals a man restrained in shackles, he heals a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years, and finally he dismisses a crowd of mourners saying the girl is not dead but merely asleep and calls her out to that lifeless body, "Little girl, get up!" and her life is restored. Then he goes home. He begins teaching and those familiar faces start asking questions. "Where did this man get all this?" What is this wisdom that it has been given to him? How is he doing these deeds of power. Is this not the son of Mary? Are not his sisters here with us? They were suddenly offended. Jesus was amazed at their unbelief. What did Jesus do or teach that was so offensive? Why were his neighbors so offended by what said and did?

Part of this lies in the backdrop of honor and shame culture in a peasant village. Jesus was born to a certain social status. The text says he was a carpenter; this is a description of anyone who would have built things out of wood or other hard materials. The people in this period did not live in wooden houses so Jesus probably would have produced doorframes or other objects. In this community he would have been considered a skilled craftsman and his social status would have been considerably lower than those who teach the law. His neighbors would have been offended by his overreach of status. This would have been considered a dishonor to his family.

But, I think there is more to this though they weren't simply offended by him teaching, I think they were offended by the message itself. They were offended by Jesus' law of love. Love was and is offensive at times. Love at times is a burden. It is much easier to believe that God dislikes the people we dislike. That our enemies are God's enemies. It is much harder to believe in an expansive grace filled love. Whether we want to admit or not we have all but been taught consciously or unconsciously that some people are outside the reach of God. We repeatedly see in Jesus a theme where Jesus teaches, preaches, heals and overturns any customs and practices that put law above love. Jesus's love is forever expansive and extensive, showing love by welcoming and including all people in discipleship and in the kingdom of God, refusing to accept designations of "clean and unclean" of "outcasts and sinners".

This is why God's love is so shocking; Jesus repeatedly does things he should not do. In Mark 5 Jesus crosses the sea and enters a new region. This is a gentile region, a region that was separated from the Jewish region. Jesus immediately walks into an area full of tombs. The Jewish practice was to avoid areas of the dead so as not to become ritualistically unclean. A naked man, who could not be restrained by chains, which as the text says was ravaged by unclean spirits approaches Jesus. After an exchange Jesus orders these unclean spirits out of the man and into a herd of swine. Jesus is reordering the world around him ignoring these ideas that categorize people. Ignoring the idea that some people are worth more than others, that some people are more loved than others. Jesus is recognizing the image of God in a man who has all but given up his humanity.

Ben Connor professor of practical Theology at Western Theological Seminary in his book *Practicing Witness* tells the following story:

Years ago at a camp designed to accommodate adolescents with physical and intellectual disabilities, I was facing a crisis. James, a young man with Down syndrome, was inconsolably homesick. He had been crying on and off for two days, the third day of a five-day day camp, at that moment he was sitting on the floor of our cabin with his arms wrapped around his legs hugging them and weeping copiously. It was my first year on staff with this ministry.... The ministry try creates community by recruiting and training leaders to be involved in students lives, by holding regular meetings during the school year, by teaming up with a local therapeutic riding center for a competition and excursion in the fall, and by taking a five-day camp trip together in the summer. I was a seasoned youth minister with twenty years of experience working with kids. I had a master of divinity that suggested I had been prepared theologically to interpret and address the situation - in fact, at the time I was a defense away from a doctorate. Beyond such credentials, I had had the practical experience of raising my own four children to draw upon. Still, with James I had nothing to offer. Rather, I had nothing to offer James that in any way provided him comfort or perspective, and the entire cabin of campers knew it.

One camper who particularly noticed my helplessness was named Greg. As the consequence of a car accident just prior to his birth, Greg has cerebral palsy, an auditory processing disorder, and is learning disabled. He had seven major surgeries by the age of eight. Greg did not analyze the situation using the methods and techniques I had learned in seminary and then attempt to provide a solution to James's problem. Instead (as James was rocking and crying)he took the initiative to sit calmly beside James, put his arm around him, and speak words of comfort and peace to him.....Greg was equipped and placed by the Holy Spirit as a unique member of the body of Christ to minister to James. Greg bore witness to the alternate economy of the kingdom of God wherein the significance of one's contribution is not restricted by his or her ... standing.... in society. ¹

This is the message of Jesus that we are to lead our lives driven by love. That we are to do our best to display the Love God in our lives. That we like the disciples are sent out into this world to share the Love God knowing that some will welcome that message and some will reject it. But we are also receivers of the message as well we can welcome it or we can reject it. Jesus sends his disciples out two by two. They must travel lightly. He orders them out with only the clothes on their back, no bread, no bag, no money, just a staff, sandals, and a tunic. Tell the world the kingdom is coming we must repent and believe. Share the love of God with this world. Trust in the hospitality and grace of this world and know that world will welcome it.

Mike Yaconelli father of modern youth ministry shares this story.

“At the age of 76 Gertie became concerned about the young people in her church. So she volunteered at High school Youth group. The pastor asked

¹ Benjamin T. Conner. Practicing Witness: A Missional Vision of Christian Practices (Kindle Locations 20-25). Kindle Edition.

her what she would like to do? She said, I don't know God will think of something.

Gertie wasn't a speaker, she couldn't play games, she didn't want to lead a bible study. But she had a camera, she took a picture of every kid in the youth group, and put them on flash cards and wrote down information about them. She would see them at church, youth group, or around town and she would talk to them and pray for them. She memorized all the names and faces and would stand at the door every week and greet every child. Some would run past others with chat with her. At the age 86 Gertie had 3 strokes. The prospect of her death distress the kids in the youth group. After reading the book *Tuesdays with Morrie* one of the youth leaders had an idea. He approached Gertie and told her "I want to lead your funeral" She said I know and I would like you to but I'm not dead yet. He responded Yes, but I want to do your funeral while you are alive so you can hear just how much you mean to the kids. So they made plans. 10 years worth of kids showed up one night the place was packed and the kids told Gertie how much she meant to them. At one point a group of kids walked the aisle. Hiding something, Gertie had always loved perfume. The kids poured the perfume over her feet. Anointing her letting her know that she was loved. "²

This is the kingdom we are called too. A kingdom where love is the rule, where God works and moves through us despite ourselves. The question we need to wrestle with is two fold, how will we be like Greg share the love of God and will we belike Gertie's youth group welcome God's ever expansive Love into our Hearts?

² Yaconelli, Michael. *Messy Spirituality: God's annoying Love for Imperfect People*, pg. 118.