

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost 4 July 2021

Ezekiel 2:1-5 / Psalm 123 / 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 / Mark 6:1-13

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

It's wonderful to be starting off our Fourth of July in community and worship at Saint Andrew's. In many ways this year our nation's birthday is a happy one, a return to the activities we associate with this day. There'll be fireworks, and cookouts, and perhaps best of all, families and friends together, enjoying the holiday.

And in some ways it's a difficult time for us, with so many hard things going on. Our country is deeply divided over important topics, from states' rights to climate change to racism, to name a few. For some of us, church may be a place where we don't have to talk about these kinds of things, and for some it may be a place where we *can* talk about the hard things going on in life and the news, to seek perspective on how the Scriptures and our faith help us navigate today's world.

Today's Gospel reading from Saint Mark has a lot to tell us about what it means to be a disciple in a tough, confusing, sometimes painful world, which is also a place of beauty and wonder, beloved of God.

We hear two stories from Jesus' ministry that seem distinct from each other and could've been separated. Yet together they offer a compelling view of how God acts in the world, and what ministry in the name of Jesus Christ looks like. Jesus is preaching in his hometown, and sending the disciples out, so that by the end of the reading they're no longer just observing and learning from Jesus; the disciples have taken on the role and authority of the one they follow.

So, were you surprised when you first heard this story of Jesus back home, and the reaction of the people there? It makes me think of the expression "familiarity breeds contempt." When somebody just like us makes it big, for some reason we may tend to dismiss it, rather than rejoice. And maybe it's also that we humans can have a hard time receiving grace from unexpected places. Jesus wasn't what his hometown neighbors and friends expected a prophet, much less the Messiah, to look like. And to accept him as such would call into question what they thought they knew about the people and the world they lived in.

They not only seem amazed at what Jesus says and does, they take offense at it. They know him too well, and know his whole family, to imagine he could be so special. It's as

if someone from their midst shouldn't be able to do these things – maybe Jesus is “putting on airs,” or they're jealous that one of their own is given such honor.

We don't know. But we do know the hometown folks' lack of belief, their refusal to receive Jesus, limits what they can receive *from* Jesus. Saint Mark says, “he could do no deed of power there.” We don't hear why, but perhaps it reflects that we're participants in God's work in the world more than we might imagine.

And what would that say about our willingness to be vessels for God's love and healing in our lives, and in the lives of our neighbors? Do we want to participate in God's work to bless and care for creation every day, or do we resist it? And do those decisions make a difference in how God's power to heal and care takes expression?

As we've heard in stories from Saint Mark's gospel, up until now there's always great desire on the part of the people asking for help to be healed and restored. But in Jesus' hometown, all people can see is the local kid who's made it big, maybe too big for his britches. They're trapped in their comparisons and complaints, so they aren't interested in receiving his blessings. Even Jesus cannot believe it.

So it may be that God actively enlists us in God's work, inviting our partnership. God shares God's ministry of reconciliation and healing with us, which means that every day we have an opportunity to be channels of grace and mercy to people in a world that's desperately in need of grace and mercy.

This brings us to the second story, as Jesus equips and commissions the disciples to carry on his ministry. The mission of announcing the kingdom and sharing God's love will take more than one miracle worker – it's going to take a team of people empowered and sent to witness to God's justice and mercy.

And they're to live completely dependent on the hospitality of others. Jesus has just been on the receiving end of a lack of hospitality, but he still knows the community he's forming has at its center interdependence, mutuality, and vulnerability that true hospitality demands of us and creates in us.

Jesus' instructions to the disciples contain some good pointers for the Christian life:

1. Life and ministry are easier when you don't try to do it all by yourself. From Ecclesiastes: "Two are better than one;" from Genesis: "it is good for them not to be alone" in human community.

2. Keep it simple; depend on God. This can be tough for us, living in a culture that values material possessions so highly. Many of us may find that with additional possessions come additional hassles and worries, which we sometimes respond to by buying still more stuff, trying to prove our happiness. Jesus tells the disciples to simplify, making it easier to move around and be always reminded that we need to trust in God for all we need.
3. Be grateful for hospitality, but not dependent on it. Look for friends, expect the best, but don't be discouraged when it doesn't happen. Shake it off and move on. As we heard a few weeks ago how the seed grows without the farmer knowing how, so too the success of our mission and ministry isn't based on how it's received by others. We are called to be faithful; and sometimes others will love what we're doing, and sometimes they will not.

You might remember the movie *Apollo 13*, about a space mission that runs into trouble and in the end manages to get safely back to Earth. As the people on the ground are working furiously to get the astronauts home, the director of Mission Control has a line that's often quoted: "Failure is not an option!"

Many of us can feel haunted by the fear of failure. But today's Gospel, and the cross marked on our foreheads in baptism, teach us that failure is part of the life of faith.

Yes, failure and mistakes may knock us off our feet. But this morning from the Hebrew Scriptures we heard the Spirit calling the prophet Ezekiel, putting him back on his feet, and Saint Paul in our second reading reminding us that "Christ's grace is sufficient for you." Jesus doesn't dwell on his apparent failure in his hometown; he gets on with his work, commissioning the disciples and sending them out.

We are invited into independence from the idea that we have to go it alone. When we grapple with self-doubt or despair, as individuals and as a congregation, we can remember Jesus is in our hands and feet, serving the neighbor, bearing the good news. In Christ, we keep healing, sending, and proclaiming God's love.

Jesus is with us always, redefining failure and success, strength and weakness. We come together at the Lord's Supper, and go out to do great things together, to discover our independence through interdependence, our strength through vulnerability.

Jesus blesses us to be a blessing as we love and care for this world. And to him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.