

“Following Jesus: It Makes a Difference”

Mark 6:1-13, 30-44

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Last Sunday we looked at two healing stories in Mark chapter 5, the story of the synagogue leader named Jairus and his 12 year-old daughter who was at the point of death, and an unnamed woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. If you remember, the two healing stories are sandwiched together, with one in the middle and the other at the beginning and the end. While Jesus is on his way to Jairus' house to heal the sick girl, the woman who had been bleeding is so bold as to reach out and touch Jesus' robe, and she is healed. Jesus takes the time to talk with the woman, and he tells her, “Daughter your faith has made you well!” (5. 34). When Jesus finally makes it to Jairus' house, he is told that the sick girl has died. The mourners are there, weeping loudly. And what does Jesus do? He remains calm - there's no need to panic! Jesus demonstrates the power of faith and God's power of life over death - he takes the girl by the hand and invites her to rise up to new life, and she does. The chapter ends on a high note - the girl gets up, walks around the room, and Jesus instructs those gathered to give her something to eat.

Today's reading picks up right where we left off, starting with the first verse of chapter 6. I invite you to read along with me the verses that are in bold, found in your bulletin insert. Let us turn our hearts to God's Word for us this day...

Mark 6:1-13, 30-44 *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*

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

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

The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, **“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”** For many were coming

and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But Jesus answered them, **"You give them something to eat."** The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

There's an old Bible joke that recently has been turned into a meme on social media. It says, **"I can do all things through a Bible verse taken out of context!"** In my time as a Christian and as a pastor, I certainly have seen this to be true. Of all the [31,102 verses in the Bible](#), you can easily pick out one or two verses to make a point about anything. Whether it's making the case we should all be vegetarians, or justifying the practice of slavery, or predicting the day & time when Jesus will return to earth, we humans have proven to be very capable of taking one thing out of the Bible and making it mean whatever we want it to be. One of the reasons I love the Reformed Presbyterian faith is that in the end we place ultimate authority on Jesus the Living Word of God, rather than the written, inspired word of God that came through human vessels thousands of years ago.

On most Sundays, like I did today, I start with a brief review of the previous Sunday's passage. I do this not because I think your memories are exceptionally poor, or because I want to catch up those who might have been away last week. No, I share these summaries because the story being told in the Gospel of Mark builds on what has come right before it. So, if we are to understand today's passage in chapter 6, we have to be reminded of what has happened in chapter 5. Instead of taking things out of context, we need to try and understand the Bible in the context of the verses that come right before and after it.

With this little bit of a lesson in Bible interpretation, let's jump into today's passage. Chapter 6 begins with the transition verse, "Jesus left that place and came to his hometown." That place refers to the home of Jairus the synagogue leader, the place where Jesus has just raised a dead girl back to life - it's the place where we have seen the great faith of Jairus who sought Jesus out when his daughter was gravely ill. It's the place where we have seen the courageous faith of a woman labeled unclean because of her bleeding reach out and touch Jesus, trusting that he could heal her. From such a place of great faith, Jesus now returns to his hometown of Nazareth. Maybe he's coming home to rest, or catch up with those family and friends who should know him best. But if you remember the last time his family showed up in the story back in chapter 3, things were rather tense (3:20-21, 31-35). People were questioning how Jesus was able to cast out unclean spirits, and the religious leaders thought he was working with the Devil. Many thought he had gone out of his mind, and so his family tried to do an intervention and restrain him. And in today's passage we hear how those at home still can't understand how Jesus is speaking with such wisdom and doing such deeds of healing and power. He's just raised a girl up from the dead! They are astonished: "Where did he get all of this? Isn't this the kid we knew growing up who did ordinary things like the rest of us? He's the carpenter we have always known - he's Mary's son - he's really no different than his

brothers and sisters, right!” But what begins as astonishment quickly turns to something else - the hometown folks take offense at him. The Greek word literally means “they stumbled” or were scandalized by him. They reject him and do not have the faith in him (Lamar Williamson, [Mark Interpretation Bible Commentary](#), p. 114). And because of their lack of faith, Jesus is not able to do many deeds of power, except for laying hands on a few people and healing them.

How we respond to Jesus does make a difference, for good or for ill! But whatever is behind the hometown response, it could not be more different than the response of Jairus and the woman who was healed from her bleeding. **The irony that Mark develops throughout his gospel is that those closest to Jesus, in this case those from his hometown - those closest who we might expect to be insiders - they are among the ones who do NOT get him.** Perhaps when those who gain great fame return home, there’s reason for resentment or jealousy - perhaps those who have known us the longest are the ones who keep us in old familiar boxes and labels. Whatever may be the reason behind their unbelief, Jesus simply calls a spade a spade: prophets are never welcome in their hometown. I love how Jesus simply speaks his truth and then he moves on to the other villages. He doesn’t get into a back and forth with his homies in Nazareth- no, he doesn’t get defensive or angry or anything like that. Instead, he calls his disciples together and sends them out two by two to continue the work of God’s kingdom. The same power that Jesus used to cast out unclean spirits, this same power now resides in the disciples. The same message Jesus preached, the disciples were to proclaim. It’s the good news of God’s reign come near. And because of this good news, the invitation is to reorient our lives - to change the direction we are going, to do a 180 degree turn. No longer are we to live with our primary loyalty to our families or our religion or to our country. Our primary loyalty should reside in God’s reign which is breaking into our world.

Like some of you here today, I have gone on various mission trips - spending time in other places like Canton, NC & Hazzard, KY - most recently in Charleston & Raleigh, too. We go out to share the Good News through our good works of service, hopefully giving and receiving, too. Last week during our youth group devotion I asked the question, “Where have you seen God?” and the first answer given was this: on a mission trip. But did you notice what Jesus says to the disciples before they go out on their first mission trip? He orders them to take nothing for their journey except a staff: they are not to bring bread or a bag, nor money but to wear only sandals and to take just one, not two, undergarments. (I confess when I pack for trips I am guilty of overpacking - taking extra t-shirts and shoes, extra snacks in case the food is not desirable - and my own pillow, too!)

In contrast to our dependance on stuff, Jesus invites the disciples to depend on something else - they are to put their trust in God and God’s provision. Bible scholar Lamar Williamson says that **“The charge to travel light and to accept whatever accommodations are offered is an abiding call to Christians to simplify our lives and trust God completely”** (Williamson, p. 121). In a consumer- driven “we can get whatever we want in a simple click” world, trusting in God (and not in our stuff) is never easy. Maybe that’s why Jesus sends them out in twos - together they might be able to support and encourage and hold each other

accountable to the mission.

From what we can tell, the disciples' first experience in mission was successful. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them, just as Jesus had been doing in his ministry. And after reporting back to Jesus, he gives them some wise advice: "Let's go away to a deserted place so you can rest a while!" What follows is the well-known story of the feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. While the disciples do not get much time to relax, they do learn that ministry is about bringing to Jesus whatever they have, and then letting him do the rest. But instead of focusing on this part of the passage, which is worthy of a sermon or two itself, in closing I want to say something about the verses NOT included today. If you were paying attention, you might have noticed we jumped from verse 13 all the way to verse 30 in our reading today. The chunk that was left out is another one of Mark's sandwich passages - in this case, it's the story of John the Baptist who is beheaded by King Herod because of a promise he makes to his wife. The story of the disciples being sent out and then returning are the two pieces of bread, and the drama of John's head being served up on the platter is the meat in the middle. While this chunk is also worthy of its own sermon, you can thank me that I am not going to bite off more than I can chew today! **What I want to lift up to you is that we are getting really close to the heart of Mark's gospel, and that is the truth that this Jesus whom we have been following from the beginning - the One who is doing all these deeds of power - the One who is Lord over the unclean spirits, bringing healing and wholeness to so many - teaching with wisdom and authority, forgiving sins and even raising up the dead - this same One is going to walk the path of suffering, denial and death.** The rejection he faces in his hometown, the news that John the Baptist was arrested and then killed - all of this foreshadows what is going to happen to Jesus. During the weeks ahead of us in the season of Lent, we will see that his disciples will not be able to understand why their leader will be going down the path of suffering, denial and death. Those who are closest to Jesus, those in his inner circle, these beloved ones who are called to take up their cross and follow him, they will not be able to embrace the idea of a Messiah who suffers and dies. And the challenge these disciples faced is the same challenge we face, those of us who are present day disciples. What might it mean for us to follow One who tells us to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses and follow where he leads? In a world that tells us we should build our lives on "the corner of healthy and happy" (from Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun & Ryan McAnnally-Linz's [Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most](#)) what does it mean for us to follow this Jesus? Ultimately, the answer to this question for each of us comes through prayer and discernment, individually and together. The 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter have been the time Christians have dedicated themselves to questions like these, and I hope we can make this journey together in the weeks ahead.

Thanks be to God. Amen