

July 7, 2024  
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 9B  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Ezekiel 2:1-5*

*Psalms 48*

*2 Corinthians 12:2-10*

*Mark 6:1-13*

In the Name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's Gospel comes in two parts. Each part is a story unto itself, capable of standing alone. And, in the genius of Mark the Evangelist, presenting them side-by-side tells us a great deal about how God acts in the world, and what ministry in the name of Jesus – spoiler alert, that's **our** ministry, might look like.

The first is a story of failure and rejection. After initial enthusiasm, the people of Jesus' hometown turned against him. He was, *unable to do any miracles there*.

The second is a story of success. The disciples *cast out many demons, and they anointed many sick people and healed them*.

Does anyone else find this combination odd? On one hand there is Jesus, who up to this point in Mark had been teaching with power, and healing, and casting out demons, now able to do almost nothing. On the other hand, there are the disciples, so often missing the point, even missing in action, now made powerful and effective.

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Story Number One: Jesus goes home. After calming storms, silencing demons and curing all manner of diseases on both the Jewish and Gentile sides of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus heads to his home town: not Bethlehem where he was born, but Nazareth, where he grew up.

Given the press he'd been getting, we might have expected a big welcome – maybe the local high school marching band, the mayor with a key to the city, all accompanied by new dance trends on TikTok to the pop hit "Local Boy Does Good!"

But, then we remember that Mark's stories about Jesus never end up where we think they might; even where we think they should. And this one turns south in a hurry.

Immediately after their original astonishment, the whispering campaign began. "Who does he think he is?" "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son?" How quick we are to discredit and shame the source of something new that makes us uncomfortable. We shoot the messenger. We look down on those who work with their hands. Perhaps we even sneer at the child of a single mother.

But Mark puts a sharper point on the crowd's reaction. They didn't just ignore him or argue with him. They stumbled over his words; they were scandalized by him. "They took *offense* at him." Can you imagine a harsher rejection? Offense.

Why? What happened? He was one of them--at least he had recently been one of them. Maybe that was the problem – familiarity breeds contempt. He grew up here; they knew him. How can he, suddenly, be all that? *Who does he think he is? Why him and not me?*

We often see life as a zero-sum game, where there's only so much affirmation to go around. If you've got some, that means you took it away from me. Years ago, someone told me about crabs in a barrel. Just picture that for a second – a barrelful of live crabs, crawling all over each other. Some might find their way up and over to escape, but as they do, other crabs pull them back down to prevent any from getting out. It's not a pleasant metaphor, to be sure, but driven by envy and spite, it's a very human reality.

Maybe they got so hung up on thinking they knew who Jesus was, that they couldn't see what Jesus was doing. Maybe they're upset that he had been healing and doing miracles everywhere – but here. Why didn't he start at home?

Then he takes on the mantle of a prophet, those who "are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

In this first story, Mark shows Jesus constructing a new sort of community, one that doesn't use existing family structures. You will hear the echoes of several weeks ago when we heard Jesus telling the crowd, *whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother* (Mark 3:35).

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Then the scene changes, and we have Story Number Two. We see the disciples as part of this new community of faith and trust that Jesus is creating, and he begins sending them out, two by two, to carry on his work. Oh, and, "pack light," he tells them.

In this season of vacationing, let's linger a moment with this. I always overpack. If I'm more than halfway through a book, I bring another one, so I'll have something to read – as if there weren't places to buy books where I am going. And, yes, I've heard of Kindles. In fact, what usually happens is that I don't read either of the books I've so carefully packed.

We want to make sure that we have the right stuff for the right occasions. All-in-all, we're absorbed with our stuff...because we think that it will protect us from bumps on the road. But how many carry-ons does our security blanket require?

Here we see Jesus sending out the disciples with only the clothes on their backs and a walking stick. No stuff to protect them, or to point to their own power or

authority. They were completely dependent on those who would welcome them. The only thing they had to offer was the good news from the Word of God who had sent them into the world calling on people to repent.

My friend and colleague Andrew McGowan reminds us that “repentance (*metanoia*) is the willingness to be changed. In this case, it means to join the community of trust that Jesus and his disciples embody, and to turn away from those relationships and structures which trade heavily on their own forms of honor or greatness but deny the power of God.”<sup>1</sup>

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So, that’s the two stories: where Jesus failed, the disciples succeed, performing many deeds of power. When I hold the stories up together, I hear whispers of something that may have come from an ancient middle school playground: **I am God and you are not.**

In the first story, Jesus fails. But this is the Jesus we think we know, that we can predict, that we can control. This Jesus is mostly a projection of our own expectations and fears. This Jesus is, like our stuff, an idol. An idol that blinds us to what Jesus does; and wants to do...for us, with us.

How often do we limit the way God tries to work in our own lives – either as individuals or as communities? How often do we hear, sometimes faintly, sometimes loudly, a call to a radically different way of life and ministry in and to God’s world? Something that seems completely outrageous to imagine.

I think most of us, if we hear that call, pick up the phone and say, “Sorry, wrong number. There’s no one like that here.”

Like the people of Nazareth who knew Jesus and couldn’t believe that he was *all that*, we know ourselves, and can’t believe that God would call us to anything. I mean, if you really (really) knew me, you’d never think I should be a priest. But it’s not about me, or about you, no matter how well we think we know God, because **God is God and we are not.**

In the second story, the disciples succeed because they must rely completely on God. They left all their other “stuff” at home. They have no perfect sermon, no polished speech, no theological degrees or silk vestments. They are only prophets – telling it like it is.

**God is God and we are not. And God calls us, and needs us.**

You may be unable to believe that the God you and I have created (often in the image of our parents) can love us. But the Gospel tells us at every turn that the God

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew McGowan, *Andrew’s Version: Thoughts on the RCL Reading*, July 2, 2024.

who actually did create us out of love does love us, even in the face of our rejection. And all that stuff we love isn't needed to protect us.

And, just as persistently, God desires to *share* God's ministry of reconciliation and healing with us, which means that each and every day we, you and I, have the opportunity to be prophets: to tell the world what actually is. Who God really is and what wonders God really does. Even in the face of rejection, God calls you and me to be channels of grace and mercy to a world desperately in need of grace and mercy.

God has chosen us in Baptism and feeds us at this table, forming us into an ever renewing community that is the Body of Christ. Then, God calls us to bless, to serve, to care for God's world as it exists in the here and now. When it seems that everything in that world seems to be going off the rails, it seems like a frightening proposition, doesn't it?

So, let us remember that we are not God, but God is. And, as we reminded ourselves in song as we gathered this morning, God's grace is sufficient for us, and for our weaknesses:

Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed!  
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid.  
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,  
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.<sup>2</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Attributed to K-. in John Rippon's *A Selection of Hymns* (1787).