

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – July 4, 2021
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Remember the saying, “Darned if you do and darned if you don’t”? You might know a stronger version of it. It has come to mean that in specific situations, a person will be blamed or considered wrong no matter what he or she (they do) does.

Today I find myself in such a situation. It is the fourth of July, the United States Independence Day and it is a Sunday, the feast of our Lord Jesus Christ. It’s a day when it’s hard to know where to focus.

For some the expectation is that the national holiday takes priority and should be preached about and for others church (religion) takes priority and one should not preach about the holiday. (I’ll give you a hint – as a deacon, I’m always going to choose to preach about the Gospel, no matter what!). What this means is that some of you will be pleased, and others of you will not.

I think the same could be said of the expectations and roles in the text we just heard from Mark. In it we see Jesus both ministering in his hometown with particular results (rejection leading to new ministry) and we see Jesus sending out the disciples to begin their own ministry with particular results (demons were cast out and many who were sick were cured).

In both, there are encounters with some form of unbelief, discomfort and (lack of welcome). Jesus is considered offensive in his hometown as he is teaching in the synagogue despite those present being astounded by his wisdom and deeds of power.

The disciples are cautioned by Jesus that “if any place will not welcome them and they refuse to hear them, that as they leave, they are to shake off the dust from their feet as a testimony against them.”

For some, Jesus teaching in the synagogue is wrong no matter what he says or does, for others, it is not. As for the disciples, some will welcome them into their households and be willing to have their hearts changed, while others will not.

Instead of focusing on how the people of Jesus’ hometown are unable to believe in his wisdom and deeds of power because he is already too well known to them, we, like his disciples, can reflect upon what our response to Jesus is and how we receive him.

Jesus had been preparing the disciples for their own mission (ministry). They had been learning about the nature of the reign of God, had been receiving private teaching sessions, had witnessed Jesus perform liberating acts, even seen Jesus experience rejection. Now it was their turn. Having been granted power and authority by Jesus, they were commanded to go into households, depend upon the hospitality of others, risk rejection, take nothing with them except a staff, wear sandals, and proclaim repentance.

We have also been prepared for our own mission (ministry). Through Christian formation, regular worship and the teachings from scripture we have been learning about the nature of the reign of God. We have been granted power and authority through our Baptism into the body of Christ and we have been commanded to love God and love our neighbors. Now it is our turn to go and share the Gospel with others.

In what ways are we encouraging or inhibiting God’s work in our lives, in our family’s and friends’ lives, in our communities, in our churches and in the world?

Where might we be resisting or restricting God's activity? Perhaps there is some regret we can't get over. Or resentment that we can't let go of. Maybe there's a hurt or offense that has come to define us. For some of us, addiction or fear may be keeping us in bondage.

Or we may be so comfortable in our knowledge of how something should be that we don't have ears to hear otherwise. Are there people we think we know so well that we are unable to accept ways they may be transformed as children of our living God? The people in Jesus' hometown thought they knew him and were unable to accept his wisdom and works of power.

How do we receive Jesus, are we astounded by His teachings or do we take offense because we think we know who Jesus is? Perhaps we think that we've heard all the stories, read the Bible, or grew up in Church, and that we don't need to listen anymore. Maybe we're jaded or frightened by what we see in the world and have become full of unbelief.

Or are we, like the disciples, part of the Jesus movement, following Jesus and responding to His call to go out and preach repentance, heal the sick, cast out demons? Sometimes God may be inviting us into an opportunity or challenge that we find difficult to embrace or entertain. There may be some mission that we feel called to undertake, only we don't think we are equipped to fulfill it.

Are we trusting in the power and authority we have been given in His name, willing to get out of our comfort zones and take little or nothing on our journeys?

Are we willing to depend upon the hospitality of others and to move on if our message isn't being received?

Friends, what we do matters, we as modern-day disciples are called to take part in the Jesus movement too. Just as God's grace and mercy was sufficient for the original twelve disciples; so too is God's grace and mercy sufficient for us. We get to apply the very same ideals to our mission in ministry as the first twelve disciples that Jesus called did; to work together to build up the Kingdom of God, to not force our message on those who are not willing to hear it, to warn those who reject the Gospel, to trust that God will provide for us as God calls us, and to know that Jesus will equip us as He sends us out.

That is the promise of God, that is the promise of the Gospel. It is what is expected of us as followers of Christ, and it is within our role of making known to ourselves and to others, God's will and work in the world.

Let us pray...

Lord God Almighty, you have made all the peoples of the earth for your glory, to serve you in freedom and in peace; Give to the people of our country a zeal for justice and the strength of forbearance, that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen