

“I’ve got nothing, and that’s plenty”

Sunday, July 8, 2018

Mark 6:1-13 (focused on verses 6-13)

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A sermon preached at Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church, Wildwood, MO.

This week and next week, I’ll be approaching the scripture text a bit differently. Mark’s gospel pairs two stories in chapter six that are closely related, but also offer an opportunity to develop two very different sermons.

The more I looked at the verse the longer the sermon became. It became like that drawer you have in your kitchen that is a catch all for everything that does not have a home—in our house it is the drawer where you’ll find Sharpie markers and tools for fixing glasses, binder clips and recipe cards, rubber bands and ticket stubs. There’s a lot in there.

So here’s my plan: this week I’m going to focus on verses 6b-13. Jesus commissions the disciples for their ministries, sending them out in pairs, and telling them to take very little for their journeys. Next week, I’ll be focusing on verses 1-6, which tell the story of Jesus’ rejection by his hometown.

Pay close attention to these 13 verses and what you find is Jesus immersed in two real life dilemmas. The first thing that comes to mind is understanding how we experience rejection. Secondly, the story reminds us that sometimes all we have to share is our own weakness and vulnerability. Like I said, there there’s a lot in these 13 verses. So let’s cut this into two sections, two sermons. These scenes seem so very different, but I think there’s a unifying thread connecting both parts.

In the first section, Jesus is the guest preacher at the synagogue in Nazareth. Being a guest preacher is not as simple as it may seem – and being the guest preacher in your hometown is even harder. At first things seem to be going good – his aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors and friends are beaming with pride. They laugh at his opening joke, amazed at the things he was saying.

But soon things fall apart. Who knows what happened? Maybe someone forgot to order donuts that morning. Or maybe what he says cuts too close to the bone. Some wonder if he's become too political "Well, that's what happens when you send a kid off to school," they say.

There he is, standing in the pulpit, a prophet without honor in his hometown, helpless to do anything about it. Jesus is rejected. Rejection feels powerless.

But instead of falling apart Jesus commissions the disciples to ministry. He sends them into the surrounding villages. He sets up teams of two, and gives them explicit instructions on what to take. His packing list for them is simple: take nothing.

No bread, no bag, no money in their belts. They are not to appear as beggars, who often wore bags to collect money. They are to go with nothing to eat, and instead are summoned to rely on the hospitality of strangers. Imagine: Vacation Bible School without a planned snack!

He sends them out with nothing.

Do yourself a favor and go see the wonderful documentary, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" It's the story of Fred McFeely Rogers, the creator of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. But it is much more than that. If Presbyterians named saints, Fred Rogers would be called Saint Fred of the Cardigan. When Fred Rogers was ordained by the Presbyterian Church, the church didn't know what to do with this man who wanted to be a minister and work in children's television. In one of the best decisions ever made by Presbyterians, the church commissioned him to be an evangelist to children through television.

And then they sent him out with nothing. "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" was sort of a "do it yourself project" in 1968. The sets were not great, the puppets were handmade, the music created by Fred Rogers and even the sweaters were knitted by his mother. He had nothing!

But from that simple set he proclaimed a powerful message: you are loved, you are treasured, you are important.

I can think of few things which could change the world more today than Fred Rogers' simple songs and promises.

Likewise, the disciples are sent out with nothing. They have watched Jesus being rejected in what was supposedly friendly turf, and now they are sent out into what might seem to be far less friendly territory. They're sent into places where they are not known and where they have no connections, and are told to take only a stick to keep the wild dogs away.

They have plenty of nothing. But, as it turns out, that's all they need.

"Nothing" has been on my mind lately, and by "nothing" I mean plenty! Images of power surround us. We are told that strength equals success, that weakness and vulnerability are indicators of lesser standing. It's true in the world, and it's true in the world of the church. Bigger is not only better, but it is best. Success means that the strong help the weak. Go to any gathering of ministers and the first question is usually, "So, how big is your church?"

We tend to think, "We're small. We don't have very much. Our VBS only has a few kids. Our youth group is small, our choir is small."

But we have all that we need. Sent by God, we are given the same commission the disciples receive; indeed, we are given the same authority. Go and proclaim. Go and tell what it means to be loved by Jesus. Go and tell them that God loves you no matter who you are, or are not, where you have been, or where you are going.

We pray every week for young families to come and be part of this church. I know that is a concern. It is my concern, and it is my prayer as well. But I also know that many times churches wait and wait and wait for children who never show up. I was once set by the Presbytery to moderate a meeting of a church Session. They spent over an hour debating whether to put an elevator in the church building. I later found out that they had been having the same argument for 40 years. And when they sold the building last year, they still had not put in an elevator.

But that didn't mean the church closed. Instead, they decided to go out of the building and find what God is doing. They chose to be sent, just as Jesus sent

the disciples. Jesus does not wait for people to come to him, and neither did Fred Rogers wait for children to show up in his studio.

I'd like to think that if Fred Rogers were alive today he would also want Presbyterian and other churches to be filled with children, but that he would ask us, "Are you going to where the children are? Are you willing to reach out to the families in this neighborhood, to ask them, "Won't you be my neighbor?"

We have dozens of children coming to this church this week. Some have a church, some do not, and some may never come back. I can tell you without any shred of doubt that none of them will ever, ever come back if someone does not take the time to invite them. We do not have a fancy program. We do not have special effects. We have a community that cares and believes that children are gifts from God.

And that is enough.

Whether you can come and be here every day or be here for a few minutes in the morning or be here to help clean up or even to eat a hot dog Thursday evening – we need to remember that there is nothing more important today than changing the life of a child.

That is the message Jesus offers us today: sometimes nothing is more than enough. The message of the incarnation – of the baby born in a manger who gave his life for others – is not a message of power but of strength revealed in weakness, or as Paul says, whenever we are weak, then we are strong. The disciples are sent out with nothing, and that's plenty, because Jesus sends them with the authority of God.

Fred Rogers was fond of saying, "deep and simple is far more essential than shallow and complex."¹

Think about that: deep and simple is far more essential than shallow and complex. Shaped by our experience of God's love in Jesus Christ, we go into the world confident that while we may not have much, we have all that we need. Amen.

¹ <http://www.misterogersandme.com/about/>