



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

On The Edge of the Inside

July 8, 2018 – 7th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 6:1-13

The Rev. Chrissy Westbury

He 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 he 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.

I have to admit, when I realized that this was the first Gospel reading that came up after Seth headed out for three weeks of study and vacation, I could not resist teasing him a bit. Hometown boy comes back and speaks in the place of worship in which he was raised, and the people scoff at him, remembering him as a child and totally disbelieving that he could have anything of import to teach them. Gee, Seth...why would you not want to preach on that? He assured me the timing was entirely coincidental.

That being said, I suspect that making the choice to come back here – to the church in which he grew up, the church where his parents still attend – was not the easiest decision for Seth to make. And, I suspect that for some of you, it took a little time to see him as your pastor, rather than as Jim and Sue's son – perhaps even the boy you taught in Sunday School or knew in youth group.

I imagine that the people of Nazareth had a difficult time reconciling the Jesus they knew with the man who was traveling all over doing incredible deeds of power in the name of God. Mark places this story right after telling of some of the most astonishing miracles we see Jesus perform in this Gospel. He casts out demons, heals a woman with unceasing bleeding, and even brings a child back from the dead. Each of these stories illustrates the divine power present in Jesus. Who but God possesses the power to overcome demonic possession, incurable illness, and even death? Each of these stories also highlights the wholehearted belief of the person who seeks out Jesus, instigating the healing event. The bleeding woman believes that if she just touches the hem of Jesus' garment, she

would be healed. Jairus seeks out Jesus, believing completely in his ability to heal his daughter. Even the demon that Jesus casts out of the possessed man recognizes him and calls him “Jesus, Son of the Most High God.”

This sets up quite a contrast to the way Jesus is received in Nazareth. Here comes Jesus, back to visit amid a swirl of stories – each more fantastic than the last. He comes into town with his cadre of fishermen and outcasts, and he goes to the synagogue and begins to teach. And the people, Mark tells us, “took offense at him.” What, exactly is it that they are offended by? Perhaps it is simply his hubris – the fact that he dares to stand before them and claim a knowledge that they do not possess - a knowledge that, by rights, he should not possess. This upstart kid, this carpenter, this son of Mary? (Note that Mark only names Mary. It is generally believed that Joseph was dead by the time Jesus began his public ministry, but, even in the case of a widowed mother, a son would still be identified primarily as the son of his father. In a time long before surnames, the connection to the father is how people were identified – Yeshua ben Yosef. Jesus, son of Joseph. Was this identification of Jesus through only his mother a dig at the fact that Mary and Joseph were not officially married when Jesus was born, a labeling of Jesus as without a legitimate father?)

With apologies to Lin-Manuel Miranda, the people of Nazareth might have been thinking:

"How does an illegitimate, orphan
son of a ‘virgin’ and a carpenter,
dropped in the middle of a forgotten
spot known as Bethlehem
by providence,
impoverished, in squalor,

Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?"

The people are unable to reconcile what they know of this man with the stories they have heard and with the things he is saying. Jesus seems to be speaking out of turn – above his station. In spite of all they have heard about what he has done in other places, they cannot believe that their Jesus, this kid they knew, is the Christ. And their disbelief has consequences, Mark tells us. Jesus was unable to do the deeds of power he had done elsewhere, because of the disbelief of the people – his neighbors, friends, and family.

This is not something we hear very often – that Jesus was unable to do something. Surely, if Jesus had done a few really impressive miracles, he would've given the people no choice but to believe in him! But that's the thing... Jesus always gives a choice. It was not that Jesus was physically or spiritually incapable of miracles - limited somehow by the unbelief of the people. The limitation was his own moral choice. He refused to force himself upon those who did not want him.

And he went on to instruct his disciples to do likewise – to do the work where they are received and to move on when they are rejected. He sends them out in pairs, empowering them to help spread the good news of healing and deliverance. Jesus tells them to take nothing extra with them – just a staff, a single tunic, and sandals for their feet. For everything else, they would be dependent on people of faith in the communities to whom they ministered. Jesus also tells them that they must stay in the first house that welcomes them for the duration of their visit – no shopping around for a better bed or meal! However, if they are turned away – if their message is rejected – by a household or by a town, they should shake the dust off their sandals and move on down the road.

Jesus makes it clear here, that the disciples should expect rejection. They should expect nights when they have nowhere to sleep and their stomachs ache from hunger. They should expect to live their lives on the margins, on the edge – on the edge of starvation, on the edge of homelessness, on the edge of the law and the church authorities, on the edge of society. That is not to say that they are complete outsiders. They are dependent upon the hospitality of strangers. They have to understand the way society works and how to move within it, but they will never be totally comfortable in the inner circle.

Richard Rohr says it better than I ever could. “A biblical prophet...is always on the edge of the inside. Not an outsider throwing rocks, not a comfortable insider who defends the status quo, but one who lives precariously with two perspectives held tightly together – the faithful insider and the critical outsider at the same time. Not ensconced safely inside but not so far outside as to lose compassion or understanding. Like a carpenter’s level, the prophet has to balance the small bubble in the glass between here and there, between yes and no, between loyalty and critique. The prophet must hold these perspectives in a loving and necessary creative tension.”

Being an insider with Jesus means being on the edge of the outside of the status quo. And, let’s face it, being on the edge is a difficult place to maintain. It’s much easier to be a total insider – sitting in the rooms of power where the decisions are made – or a total outsider – launching tirades against those in power, but not really accountable to anyone. It’s so much harder to live and work in the in between, on the edge of the inside. And it is so important to listen to the perspectives of the people who are there. A person at the edge of the inside is part of the group, but is not completely sucked in to the groupthink. A person at the edge of the inside can see what is good and what is to be critiqued. When you live

on the edge of the inside says Rohr, “You are free from its central seductions, but also free to hear its core message in very new and creative ways.” When you are at the edge, it opens you up to knowing and loving those on the inside and those on the outside, and that makes it really hard to allow one group to succeed at the expense of the other. A person at the edge of the inside is often the best voice for reform within a group. The judgement of the critical outsider is a powerful thing when combined with the genuine love and loyalty of an insider.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is, to me, one of the best examples of this life on the edge of the inside. He was an educated man, well-spoken, solidly middle-class. He was an American, and he loved this country – loved it enough to speak out against the culture that excluded him and so many others from the inner core because of the color of their skin. His “I Have a Dream” speech is, perhaps, his most well-known, but it is not the only dream he spoke of. He spoke, too, of the American Dream, saying, “America is essentially a dream, a dream yet unfulfilled. The substance of the dream is expressed in some very familiar words found in the Declaration of Independence. ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ This is a dream.

“Now one of the first things we notice about this dream is an amazing universalism. It does not say some men, it says all men. It does not say all white men, but it says all men which includes black men. It doesn’t say all Protestants, but it says all men which includes Catholics. It doesn’t say all Gentiles, it says all men which includes Jews. And that is something else at the center of the American Dream which is one of the distinguishing points, one of the things that distinguishes it from other forms of government, particularly totalitarian systems.

It says that each individual has certain basic rights that are neither derived from nor conferred by the state. They are gifts from the hands of the Almighty God. Very seldom if ever in the history of the world has a socio-political document expressed in such profound eloquent and unequivocal language the dignity and the worth of human personality.

But ever since the Founding Fathers of our nation dreamed this dream, America has been something of a schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against herself.... But now, more than ever before, our nation is challenged to realize this dream. For the shape of the world today does not afford us the luxury of an anemic democracy, and the price that America must pay for continued oppression is the price of its own destruction.”

In another sermon, I might address the fact that “all men” did not then, and does not now, fully include women or transgender and nonbinary individuals, but... I’ll let that opportunity pass for now, and focus instead on the core of this powerful message. King speaks with authority – as one who loves the ideals upon which this nation was founded, but refuses to accept the flawed, unequal, and corrupt implementation of those ideals. He speaks from the edge of the inside.

The edge is a holy place, a prophetic place, a precarious place. I read a piece in the New York Times last week in which the columnist suggests that “When people are afraid or defensive, they have no tolerance for the person at the edge of inside. They want purity, rigidity and lock-step unity. But now more than ever we need people who have the courage to love on the edge of inside, who love their (political) parties and organizations so much that they can critique them as a brother, operate on them from the inside as a friend and dauntlessly insist that they live up to their truest selves.”

So, my friends, what do you think?

Will you come to the edge?

Will you follow Jesus to the margins, knowing full well that it is not a comfortable place to be?

Will you come to the edge, afraid that you might fall, and allowing for the possibility that you'll fly instead?

Amen.