

July 5, 2015

Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church

Mark 6:1-13

Being Guests

For a Thanksgiving, not too many years ago, my husband and our two children and I travelled up to Minnesota to celebrate that fine American holiday with family there. (I can tell this story today because it involves my son John, who was then maybe 9, who might not care to hear this anecdote about him in a sermon, but who happens not to be here today.) We had our packing list of things for the trip, and we filled up the car, told the kids to grab the things they packed and get in, and then we got on the road. Despite concerns of holiday traffic and weather conditions—always a question when travelling north at that time of year—it was a clear day and we were making good time. More than five hours in, we hadn't even had to make any stops, but now needed gas, needed to stretch. We pull over, and open the car doors—it's getting a little darker, and colder, and I say, "John, where's your coat?" It was back at home in Chicago. When we told him to get in the car he just did. As he was.

I think of this when I hear about the journey the disciples take in the gospel reading today, and Jesus' packing directions for it, for these directions are really are more about what is not packed. Jesus says, "Don't bring bread, or a bag, or money." Jesus' packing directions are so very light they seem the equivalent of just, "Just go, as you are," like my son John did. (Though I do want to point out that when Jesus says, "Don't even bring two tunics," it does imply you should bring at least one tunic, or coat, when travelling to Minnesota, in late November.)

But no bread, no bag, no money? These seem rather important items for a journey, and so intentionally not packing them seems a surprising, counterintuitive choice. What are you going to eat? What about your stuff? Where are you going to stay? Shouldn't you have all those things in place before you set out on a journey, especially on a journey of such importance, which this trip in Mark's gospel certainly is. At this point in the story, six chapters in to Mark's gospel, Jesus has been doing all kinds of teaching and healing, and now he tells the disciples to go do it, too. They are to take what they've been taught, what they've seen him do, and now they're going to do it, share it, themselves. They are sent out by Jesus, on his behalf, on and with his authority, to do what he's been doing: healing the sick, casting out demons, proclaiming the gospel, the kingdom is coming. They are to be his emissaries.

It's a key point in the progress of Mark's gospel, the point where the disciples are made part of the mission—a somewhat surprising choice for them at this point, since the disciples haven't seemed like they really get who Jesus is and what he's up to. Still he sends them out. It's a key point for us now too. We too need to hear Jesus' directions about mission, about witness, outreach, evangelism, sharing the good news, proclaiming the gospel. All those words and phrases are synonyms of sorts, but I'm not sure how descriptive they really are. They're churchy phrases, but what do they really mean? According to this gospel story, mission means this: that followers of Jesus intentionally engage with a world that is full of sickness, of bad spirits, a world in need of healing.

We know about sickness, we can see, we ourselves have experienced sickness, on many levels: physical, mental, economic, ecological, racial. There are people who are sick, there are sick things happening, there are people possessed by unclean spirits. Followers of Jesus are sent out with that world, sent out to travel across it, and to interact with it. That's why Jesus sends his followers out. The point of church is not to stay in church, but to equip us for life outside of it.

And here's what Jesus says about the kind of equipment to bring, "Don't pack." Actually, what Jesus gives is not a packing list, or even a no packing list, Jesus directions here are about our attitude, our approach, our mindset about how we engage in mission. What Jesus says here

means that we don't do mission, we can't do mission, with the confidence, or perhaps with the complacency, that we already have everything we need. Quite the opposite. Jesus sends his disciples out in such a way that they will most definitely need things from the people they encounter. That's the point of not packing. When you don't pack food, you have to eat other people's food. When you don't pack a bag, you'll need to use other people's things. When you don't bring money or a hotel reservation, it means you're going to be staying in someone else's house. Don't pack, Jesus says, because the missional mindset is to go as guests.

Such an attitude may seem counterintuitive. It reverses the usual understanding of mission, or outreach, or evangelism. For example, when people come to worship who have not been here before, we often refer to them as guests. They're the ones coming to us, and our goal is to make them feel welcome. Such welcome is very important. I hope that you have been made to feel welcome, however many times you have come here, and I am so thankful that so many people here are so intentional about that. Everyone deserves a welcome when they come to church, everyone—and especially people who are newer. We can forget what a lot of physical distance, what a lot of emotional distance it takes to travel into a church. It's a journey, for first time visitors and for people who have been here for some time. You are welcome here, wherever you are on your journey of faith.

All of that being said, and all that very important, notice that that is not the situation that Jesus describes when he talks about mission. Jesus does not say that mission means wait for people to come to you. No, Jesus says go out into the world and interact with others, that's what those who would be his followers are to do, go out into the world. And when we do, know that it has things we need. Engaging in mission means being alert to, looking for, listening to the world, to people in the world, all around us—and relying on them. They are food and shelter to us. We are their guests.

Thinking of ourselves as guests will change our attitude towards others in the world, and to the world itself. Pope Francis's recent encyclical on the environment encourages thinking along these lines. For many years, and especially for wealthier, industrialized nations, we've been consuming the world's natural resources at an alarming rate, as if we own it. We don't. As the psalmist reminds us, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness there in." We are guests. We get to stay here, for a brief time, mindful, hopeful, that there may be future guests, mindful that right now at this very moment there are many other guests in other parts of globe.

Thinking of ourselves as guests could also change our attitude towards history. We celebrated Independence Day yesterday, and what a great American holiday it is, in the middle of summer, when traveling doesn't require packing heavy coats. How good to celebrate the freedom we have because we live in this country. And yet, we should remember, the people who fought for our independence, were not the first Americans. Native peoples lived here, long before. Colonial Americans would have, should have, come as guests. Sometimes that was forgotten. And then there were others who were brought to America, not as guests, but as slaves. We cannot forget that history. It is still with us, as ongoing racial violence, discrimination, disquiet attest.

We cannot forget that history, but we can forget our sense of entitlement, privilege, complacency with things as they still are, and we can be sent out to proclaim a different future, a different kingdom come. We can be followers of Jesus, emissaries, agents of healing, like the disciples. We don't have to have it all figured out to do this, be this. Like the disciples, who at this point in the story were often filled with fear, who needed things explained to them, who, as one biblical commentator put it, were "empty-pocketed dimwits...empty-pocketed dimwits, that get the job done." They were just sent out, just as they were, and they cast out demons, and anointed the sick with oil, and cured them. God's mission is to use us, just as we are, and God will. God did. God does. Let's go.