

Pentecost 7B (7/8/2018)

Ezekiel 2:1-5

Psalm 123

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

We like to get what we want from church. It feels good to be part of a community that meets our individual needs and desires. But Jesus calls us not to exist for our own sake, but to perform deeds of grace and mercy for the sake of the world. And he sends us with resources, albeit not of our own choosing, but sufficient for the work of God's reign.

What do you want from church? Are you getting what you want? What do young adults want? As traditional ideas of what it means to be part of a Christian community continue to change, we've heard a lot of speculation about what they want from church. What do families with young children want? What about the most distinguished folks among us, those who've been faithful members for as long as they can remember? What do they want? And, what about the people who have never been a part of church, but might be open to exploring it? What do they want?

As we mark the decline of institutional Christianity, it's natural to feel some anxiety. We love the church, and we don't want to see it fade away. But, how should we respond? We may be tempted to believe that the church is sliding because we are not giving people what they want. The worship is not what people want. The culture is not what people want. The pastor is not what people want. The coffee is not what people want. We may conclude that we're not seeing positive results because we're not doing adequate research and development. We need to know what people really want and make it happen.

The temptation, in other words, is to transform the church into an ever-evolving service provider, that is, to conform to the consumer model that dictates

much of our everyday behavior. The prevailing wisdom is that an organization will only succeed insofar as it accommodates its patrons' preferences. If the organization can't provide a desirable service, it will cease to exist. So, in order to thrive, the church needs to fulfill the broadest possible spectrum of expectations – we need to give people what they want.

And who doesn't like to get what you want from church? It feels good to be part of a community that meets your individual needs and desires. But the message at the heart of our Gospel from Mark today is that **our purpose is not, in fact, to give people what they want. Instead, the purpose of the church is to participate in what God wants for the world.**

And the first half of the story is a reminder that what God wants is often precisely what people *don't* want. The people in Nazareth certainly don't want to change their minds about Jesus. When he presumes to teach with authority in the synagogue, his hometown neighbors are taken aback. "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?" *Isn't this the kid who repaired my doorframe a couple years ago? Isn't this the one who used to run around with his siblings while their parents should have been watching them more closely? Who does he think he is, teaching in the synagogue? He should stick to wood and nails, and not get too big for his britches.* "And they took offense at him."

That Jesus might represent the very purpose of God – that he might embody the healing and new life God is bringing about all around them – is lost on the people of Nazareth. Their prejudice blinds them to the possibility that he could be more than they believe him to be. And, can we blame them? How would we respond to an ordinary

member of our community who was reported to have suddenly become a powerful teacher and healer, let alone God's own Beloved Child?¹ We have distinct ideas about who we expect to exercise power and to speak for God.² And, our homegrown young adult woodworker doesn't usually measure up.

People don't want to be forced to change their expectations. And yet, upset expectations are part and parcel of God's inbreaking reign. **The new way of life that Jesus preaches has a way of inverting what we think we know; it's an alternative reality in which the greatest among us is our servant, where we love our enemies and pray for them, where the foolishness of the cross is wiser than human wisdom. So, Jesus is not only a stumbling block to his neighbors in Nazareth, but to anyone whose worldview is impervious to change. To follow Jesus into the reign of God means to live in anticipation of being surprised.**

Those of us who call ourselves disciples are not in the business of satisfying our desires or the desires of potential members. "He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two.... 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." **Jesus calls us not to exist for our own sake, but for the sake of others. He gathers us without exception around a word of grace and a meal of mercy, but then he pushes us back out the door to perform deeds of grace and mercy for the world. This means that the church is not a service provider for spiritual consumers, but a staging area for mobile disciples; it's not a landing strip, but a launch pad.**

¹ Beverly Zink-Sawyer, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 215.

² Matthew L. Skinner,

http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=7&d8d=5&d8y=2015&atom_id=9811.

And the good news today is that when Jesus sends us, he sends us with resources, albeit not of our choosing. Notice that the packing list is scant: “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.” Does Jesus want his disciples to suffer? Does he intend for us to fail? Of course not. However, he does expect us to walk by faith, to trust God’s promise of daily bread. His meager list of provisions is a reminder that **God’s grace is, in fact, sufficient for us**, to quote the Apostle Paul. **Jesus offers us the freedom to be satisfied with less, to be less preoccupied with what we want and more mindful of what others need.**

But, the greatest resource he provides for the journey is partnership. Notice that Jesus sends the disciples out two by two. It’s the buddy system, and it’s right there in the Gospel of Mark. Discipleship does not mean flying solo; we need each other for accountability and encouragement. We need someone to call us to task when we aren’t living up to the gifts God gives us for the work to which we’re called, and we need someone to have faith for us when we have none ourselves. We need each other when we, like Jesus, endure rejection for the message we bear, and when we, like Jesus, face persecution for the threat we pose to the ways of the world.

Dear church, take courage in the promise that the living Christ has called you – just as you are – to walk alongside your fellow disciples in the way of Jesus. And when he sends you from this place again, go out with good courage, not knowing where you go, but only that God’s hand is leading you and God’s love supporting you, through Jesus Christ our Lord.³

³ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, 304.