

Message for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (7/4/2021)
Mark 6:1-13

Plan for success. That's holy scripture in our culture. Plan for success, that is, be intentional about your goals and strategic about achieving them. Set your mind to it, work hard and smart, and watch your labor bear the fruit you desire. Planning for success is the pursuit of self-actualization, the drive to reach one's full potential. And, it's presumed to be a mostly individual endeavor. Only you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps; only you can define your dreams and chase them down. So, plan for success.

This week, as I reread the story of Jesus sending the disciples out two by two, I was reminded of the opening scenes of the 2011 hit musical *The Book of Mormon* where young men from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prepare to embark on their two-year mission to evangelize people around the world. "Two by two, we're marching door to door," they sing, "'cause God loves Mormons and he wants some more."¹ The main character, Elder Kevin Price, is especially devout and committed to the cause. His mission partner, Elder Arnold Cunningham, on the other hand, is a socially awkward compulsive liar. At first, this pairing poses no threat to Elder Price, and his self-confidence soars: "Now it's our time to go out," he sings to his partner, "and set the world's people free. We can do it together, you and me, but mostly me."² Plan for success.

But, notice that Jesus does the very opposite in today's Gospel from Mark:

¹ Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone, "Two by Two."

² Parker et. al., "You and Me (But Mostly Me)."

He ordered [the twelve] 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. "...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."

Don't take more than the bare minimum in the way of supplies, rely entirely on the hospitality of strangers, and expect to be rebuffed. And, when that inevitably happens, dust off your feet and move on.

That doesn't sound like a plan for success. The disciples' task is daunting; shouldn't Jesus provide them with all the resources and assurance he possibly can? *Make sure you've got everything you need for the journey, plan ahead for emergencies, and use this proven five-step approach to exorcism. Don't worry about what might go wrong; just envision the life-changing difference you'll make!* That would be a much better pep talk, wouldn't it?

But, Jesus doesn't intend to help his disciples plan for success; rather, he prepares them to face hardship and rejection. And in this way, the commissioning of the disciples for the work of God's reign is a plan for failure.

What are we supposed to make of that? Bear in mind that Jesus' instructions to the disciples follow immediately on the heels of his own experience of rejection. When he presumes to teach with authority in Nazareth, his hometown neighbors are taken aback. "Is not this the carpenter," they ask, "the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" *Hey, 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.

The notion that Jesus might be God's representative, that he might enact the healing and new life God intends for the world, scandalizes the people of Nazareth. Their prejudice prevents them from seeing Jesus for who he is. And, can we blame them? How would we respond to an ordinary member of our community who's become a popular teacher and healer? We have ideas about who ought to act and speak on behalf of God, and our homegrown young adult craftsman doesn't usually measure up.

The people's resistance to Jesus provides the context for his instructions to the disciples: "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you [as my hometown neighbors have refused to hear me], as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." Evidently, opposition to the reign of God is a predictable pattern everywhere, so, as one commentator puts it, "rejection is an experience common to [both] the Lord and the Church."³ In other words, plan for failure.

As you might guess, Elders Price and Cunningham fail miserably in their efforts to convert the inhabitants of the small village in Uganda to which they've been sent, and Elder Price is forced to contend with the reality of his situation. And, although *The Book of Mormon* is satirical, the main character's crisis of faith

³ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 204-5.

speaks to a question at the heart of today's Gospel: How are we to trust Jesus' call to discipleship when there are no guarantees?

In his celebrated work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "When Christ call a [person], he bids [them] come and die."⁴ Of course, the death of discipleship looks different depending on one's context, and we die with the hope that death makes way for more abundant life. Nevertheless, death in all its forms is frightening and sometimes painful. Why trade the certainty of one's own plans, one's own dreams, for the uncertainty of God's plans, God's dream for the world?

As one response to that question, let me leave you with a reflection from Martin Luther, a passage that Bonhoeffer himself quotes by way of conclusion to his chapter about discipleship and the cross:

Plunge into the deep waters beyond your own comprehension, and I will help you to comprehend even as I do [says the Lord]. Bewilderment is the true comprehension. Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge. My comprehension transcends yours. Thus Abraham went forth from his father and not knowing whither he went. He trusted himself to my knowledge, and cared not for his own, and thus he took the right road and came to his journey's end. Behold, that is the way of the cross. You cannot find it yourself, so you must let me lead you as though you were a blind man. Wherefore it is not you, no [person], no living creature, but I myself [says the Lord], who instruct you by my word and Spirit in the way you should go. Not the work which you choose, not the suffering you devise, but the road which is... contrary to all that you choose or contrive or desire – that is the road you must take. To that I call you and in that you must be my disciple. If you do that, there is the acceptable time and there your master is come.⁵

⁴ *The Cost of Discipleship*, translated by R.H. Fuller (SCM Press, 1956), 73.

⁵ Ibid. 76-7.