

“Our Mission,” 6th Sunday after Pentecost, FPC Marshfield, July 4, 2021 (Rev. Dr. Janet Wolfe)

Texts: (Ezekiel 2:1-5), Psalm 123, (2 Corinthians 12:2-10), Mark 6:1-13

Mark has no birth or childhood stories about Jesus. The Gospel begins with the preaching of John the Baptizer and the baptism of Jesus, followed by Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. After that he is ready to begin his ministry and mission to launch the reign of God. He calls his disciples and begins to travel about proclaiming the good news and bringing healing and wholeness to those he reaches. He teaches in parables, most notably the parable of the sower and the mustard seed. He preaches in Galilee and then travels across the Sea of Galilee to begin a ministry to the Gentiles, where he heals the Gerasene Demoniac. As Jesus and his disciples cross the sea, a storm comes up, scaring the disciples in spite of their experience sailing the sea for their fishing business. Jesus is asleep in the stern, but is awakened to calm the storm. In this story we first see Jesus’ power over nature, one of the many signs that he comes from God.

After his return to Galilee, where he heals a woman with a flow of blood, who has suffered for 12 years, and raises a 12 year old girl from the dead, the daughter of Jairus the synagogue leader, he makes his way to his hometown, presumably Nazareth, where he preaches in the synagogue. The congregation could not believe what they were hearing! Was this not the hometown boy who was the son of Mary. There is no mention of Joseph, which would have been the usual way of identifying a person. Some may have thought he was illegitimate, since his father was not identified. He was a simple tradesman, a carpenter. How could he preach with such authority? How could he do such deeds of power? These miraculous healings? So they were offended. Jesus acknowledged that “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown and among their own kin, and in their own house.” Because of their unbelief, he could only heal a few sick people.

He and his disciples traveled among the other villages, teaching in places where they were usually received in a more friendly and welcoming manner. He began training the disciples to do the same ministry that he was doing, for he knew that he would not be able to do it all during his lifetime and that it would be necessary to pass it on to others. He sent them out in pairs, giving them the kind of authority that he had. He told them to travel lightly, not taking money, luggage or food and taking only the clothes they were wearing. This would make it necessary for them to depend on the hospitality of those who welcomed them in the villages. There would be some who would not welcome them, so they should shake off the dust from their feet as a sign that they had been rejected, and move on to the next place. There was no point in arguing with those who did not accept them. The disciples were apparently quite successful in their preaching of repentance, their healing and casting out demons.

So what do we learn from these stories? As we proclaim the gospel, we will offend some. Jesus' ministry was directed mostly to the lower classes. He sought justice and fairness for all people, not just the prominent members of society. As we can tell from the story of the healing of the woman with the flow of blood and the daughter of the synagogue leader, he ministered to all, both the respected upper classes such as the synagogue leader, and those who were often left out or even shunned, as would have been the case with the woman with the flow of blood. She would have been considered unclean and people would have avoided her. People who benefit from the status quo do not usually appreciate those who want to change things. In the end, that is what got Jesus crucified. He offended the temple leaders and the Roman occupiers with his search for justice and peace.

Maybe this has something to say to us in this time of so much disagreement about political issues, voting rights, racism and policing, and even how we approach the pandemic. Even getting vaccinated has become a political issue. I think Jesus would have wanted us to make decisions based on what is good for the whole community.

On this Independence Day weekend, we might look at the question of voting rights. In the 18th century, when the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were written, only white male property owners could vote. Gradually over the years, we have modified the Constitution to expand the franchise to many others. After the Civil War, the 14th and 15th amendments were passed, giving full citizenship to male former slaves, including the franchise. The 19th amendment, passed in 1920, gave women the right to vote. Those who opposed the 14th and 15th amendments developed "Jim Crow" laws, to prevent black people from voting.

My involvement in the Civil Rights Movement was mostly concerned with voting rights. Influenced by the Presbyterian campus minister at the University of Colorado, I went with a group of people from there to the last day of the Selma-Montgomery March, in the spring of 1965. There were about 25,000 people there from all over the country, both black and white. This was after "Bloody Sunday," when Alabama State Troopers and local sheriffs violently attacked those who were attempting to march. Eventually, the national guard was called in and the march was allowed to proceed. The night of "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, one of the television networks happened to be showing the story of the Nuremberg Trials in Germany after World War II. People all over the country made the connection between what the Nazis had done and what had just happened in our own country. President Lyndon Johnson was so moved by the nation's reaction that he gave a national speech pledging to get a voting rights act passed as soon as possible. He ended his speech with the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, "We Shall Overcome."

A bill was presented to congress to expand voting rights. In the meantime, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Martin Luther King's organization, planned a summer of advocacy for voting rights in the South. I felt that I needed to be more involved in this, so I signed up to go to the South for the summer to work with the SCOPE Project. Along with two other people from the University of Colorado, we traveled to Atlanta for training and then were assigned to work in a small town south of Montgomery, Alabama, called Greenville. Unfortunately the Voting Rights Act did not pass until August 6, so for most of the summer we had to try to register people under the Alabama laws. Registration was only open two Mondays a month, and for only a few hours. We spent the rest of our time holding mass meetings and calling on people to register to vote. Black people had some risk if they tried to register; some would lose their jobs or be harassed by police or white citizens. They would be asked ridiculous questions to see if they were qualified to vote, such as how many jelly beans were in a jar! I think we got about 350 people registered in Butler County during the summer, but we had only one day after the Voting Rights Act passed to get people to the courthouse.

People today say that voting procedures are up to the state and local officials, but in this situation, I saw that the Federal Government needs to put some controls on what the states can do. The Supreme Court has greatly weakened the Voting Rights Act with the "Shelby County v. Holder" decision of 2013 and the case about restrictive Arizona laws that they ruled on last week. Although not every commentator agrees, these decisions seem to weaken the rights of minority voters. There is a bill before congress now named in honor of the late Representative John Lewis, who was one of those beaten on "Bloody Sunday," and who spent most of his life trying to secure the right to vote for all.

I have gone into some detail on this issue because it has greatly influenced my sense of justice and fairness, and I believe it is based on the teachings of Jesus as interpreted by Martin Luther King, Jr., and others who have taught nonviolent resistance as the most effective way to bring about change. As I said at the beginning, seeking justice does not always bring about agreement among people, especially those who lose power when changes are made. Yet, Jesus took that risk, encouraged his disciples to do likewise, and was willing to suffer the consequences to help bring in God's reign.

When Jesus sent out his disciples, he was training them to do the work of the Kingdom. That is part of our calling, too. When we are baptized and become members of the church, we are called to be Jesus' disciples, even if it means taking risks and facing opposition. May each of us seek to find our own calling to the ministry of all believers.

We ask for your guidance as we seek to do your will in our lives. As we share in communion, may we remember that we are part of a community called to seek justice and peace and fairness for all

people. Be with us and guide us as we give thanks for our nation's independence and freedom. Help us to seek ever more fairness for the treatment of all people. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.