

Mark 6:1 - 13

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On 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! ³Is 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. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If 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." ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Ezekiel 2:1 – 5 - He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. ²And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. ³He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God." ⁵Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God, our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, who calls and sends us out into the world, seemingly ill equipped to share the good news with all people. Amen.

Two words stood out for me in our texts for this morning which is both the 6th Sunday of Pentecost and the 4th of July, our nation's day of celebrating our independence - **Rebel** and **mercy**. A rebel according to Webster is one who openly resists authority or opposes any control. Mercy – a word used both in the Old and New Testaments. In OT there are two distinct roots – *rehem* (rě-heem) – the womb, i.e. motherly compassion and *hesed* (hě-sěd) – enduring strength / loyalty. The first, compassion, tells of God's goodness especially toward those in trouble. The 2nd speaks to God's faithfulness and

steadfast love. In the New Testament the Greek words are *eleos* (ēl-ā-ōs) or “pity, compassion, mercy” and *oiktirmose* (oik-tear-mōs) – ‘fellow sympathy.’ These two words, rebel and mercy or opposition and compassion can create a sense of tension yet God’s mercy doesn’t shy away.

I’m not going to provide you with an early American history lesson this morning but for a moment consider the early settlers to our country. They came seeking a place to be free from the cruelty and unkindness they endured in Europe. They came seeking relief from religious persecution, demands of feudal landowners, economic poverty and maybe even homelessness. Some came for adventure and most for the potential opportunity of a better life in a new place. In this new land they quickly found that they were still controlled by others – kings back in Europe, land owners and ‘governors’ appointed by kings and those who were here before them. There were also clashes with Native Americans who were here before them. The result – they were a rebellious people! And through their rebellious efforts they sought mercy from laws and taxes about which they had no say. Signed in 1776 the Declaration of Independence in the 2nd paragraph says, *‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (I would change that to say ‘all people’) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’* A new nation was born bringing together 13 states settled by many different people from various cultures and parts of the world, with varied religious beliefs. Maybe our nation’s founding fathers actually believed our new nation would be a land of peaceful co-existence. History has shown us otherwise. Today we are still a nation of many and varied people from even more diverse cultures and still a land of people seeking mercy – from poverty and hunger, racial and gender injustice and equality. And at times still ‘a rebellious people.’

I wonder if back in the 17th and 18th centuries when Jesuits came to ‘convert’ the Native Americans, when Puritans came seeking the freedom to establish and practice their faith without persecution, if any of them ever looked at today’s Ezekiel text, *‘³He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God.” ⁵Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.’* Note that in sending Ezekiel, God didn’t say Ezekiel had to convince the

Israelites to repent of their transgressions and necessarily turn back to God. Ezekiel's job was to go and tell.

In our gospel lesson Jesus goes to his home town where it would seem that those who had known him since childhood were also rather a rebellious people. Some of those gathered in the synagogue listening to Jesus' teaching may remember when his parents found him after 3 days sitting with the temple leaders in the synagogue in Jerusalem. Surely they could remember when as a teen and young adult Jesus had been in the local temple learning from the rabbis. Many had heard the stories of Jesus teaching and healing in other communities. Yet they question his wisdom and power. They seemingly dismiss him - after all he's a carpenter, son of Mary, a local hometown boy; what authority could he have? Surely God hasn't sent him! In Luke's version of this gospel story these hometown folks even try to throw Jesus off the cliff. They did not want to hear Jesus. They rebelled against his authority. Jesus still took God's message to the people of Nazareth and Mark tells us he also healed some people. Despite the rejection by most Jesus still showed mercy. Then he went on his way – the Nazarenes would know a prophet was among them, even if they didn't believe.

In the second portion of our gospel text, much like God sends Ezekiel out with a message for the Israelites, Jesus sends his disciples out. He sends them out in pairs – two by two, and gives them authority over unclean spirits. They are being sent to proclaim repentance. Jesus instructions to his disciples as interpreted by Eugene Peterson in *The Message* are, *'Don't think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. **You** are the equipment. No special appeals for funds. Keep it simple. And no luxury inns. Get a modest place and be content there until you leave. If you're not welcomed, not listened to, quietly withdraw. Don't make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way.'* If Jesus were giving us these instructions today he might say, *'Leave your cell phone at home. You don't need your suitcase full of clothes or extra shoes – just one pair of sturdy walking shoes and the clothes on your back. And no you don't need a backpack full of water bottles and health bars. Stay along the way with whoever will give you a roof over your head and share their bread. No local motels, not even Motel 6. And if they don't welcome you, don't make a scene, just leave peaceably and go on your way to the next home.'*

Would you go willingly or would you rebel? When my son lifted my suitcase into the trunk as we prepared to drive to Colorado in May, he said something like, 'What have

you got in here Mom, rocks?’ We live in a world of things and stuff – imagine going out with just the clothes on your back, no house to come home to at night, no idea of where your next meal might come from or where you will rest your head at night. My years of training in disaster preparedness rail against this approach! Not even my phone to call for help if I get lost or have a mishap along the way? Seriously Jesus, you must be kidding! I wonder what those 12 disciples were thinking as they listened to Jesus’ instructions. Maybe things like –

- Wait a minute – I didn’t sign up for this!
- My job description doesn’t say I am supposed to do those kinds of things.
- Are you serious? Why would people not welcome me – I’m a nice person.
- I don’t think I can do this Jesus – I’m not strong enough, brave enough – I am just plain scared!
- Maybe they were even inching back in their seats, considering if they wanted to continue to follow Jesus.

Jesus’ authority, like Ezekiel’s, came from God. He was sent to bring the message of salvation. In turn Jesus sent out the disciples. Jesus asked a lot of his disciples in sending them out. But no more than he himself did or endured. And they went. Mark tells us that not only did they proclaim that ‘all should repent’ but they also cast out demons, and anointed and healed the sick. Despite being told ahead of the journey that they might not be welcomed – that some would rebel and not listen to their message – they went anyway. Do we obey Jesus call to go or do we reject it?

How is it that today we are called to follow Jesus? Many of the acts of mercy the disciples did – healing sick, casting out demons – are big tasks and we don’t all get the opportunity to do these kinds of things.

Maybe the answer is in the welcoming. Let’s put the shoe on the other foot so to speak and consider that we are the ones on whose door the disciples knock. Consider this – two strangers show up on the doorstep asking if they can stay awhile and talk with you about their teacher – someone named Jesus. They don’t smell all that great (remember they only have the clothes on their back and they’ve been walking in the summer heat for many days traveling about the city); their beards are scraggly, their dialect is different; they aren’t from our church or even our town, they even appear to be homeless, and oh, they want to know if you can give them some dinner, too as they haven’t eaten since yesterday. They say they bring a message of God’s faithfulness,

compassion and mercy and healing. Do we invite them to join us at the dining room table or do we bring them a paper plate on the front porch?

The dictionary says the word Welcome means *'to gladly and cordially receive, freely and willingly permit or invite; to greet with pleasure and hospitality.'* Sounds fairly easy – unless it's a busy day, or maybe I'm not feeling good, or... any number of things I'm too busy doing. Do we show compassion, and welcome these strangers, offering hospitality or do we turn them away – rebelling against them because they are different or maybe just because we are afraid? Are we the one who takes time to listen or are we the household who *'will not welcome and refuses to hear'* their message?

The psalmist writes, *'Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us.'* Do we hear the cries of those seeking God's mercy? One can't miss the news worthy cries such as the cries of the people waiting for word of their relatives lost in the collapse of the Surfside apartment building or the distended bellies of starving children. This congregation regularly answers the calls for mercy through support of the food pantry, gathering clothes for those who don't have enough, and meals to feed the hungry. You have continued to do these things even amidst the challenges of a pandemic. But what about the smaller cries – the man with dementia who wanders the neighborhood, the elderly woman who has no family, the angry teen or the too thin dog tied to a short rope down the street.

Jesus welcomes us into his kingdom through the waters of our baptism. He says we don't need any special equipment or skills – we just need to listen to and not reject His invitation to go where He sends us. He asks us to open our door, and our arms, wide and welcome the strangers. And if we ignore His call, if we go about our day too busy for our morning devotions or forgetting to lift up prayers for our sick friend, Jesus is still there. God's grace and mercy are still ours. Jesus asks only that we offer a smile or stop to say hello to the wandering man on our morning walk. Can we send a note to the lonely woman or take her a bouquet from our garden? Can we offer a listening ear to the angry teen? We are Jesus' messengers sent out to bring a message of repentance and salvation and to provide mercy. As we will sing in our closing hymn, we are called,

*To be your presence is our mission here,
to show compassion's face and list'ning ear,
to be your heart of mercy ever near, alleluia!*