

July 5, 2015

TEXT: Mark 6:1–13

TITLE: Arm's Length Ministry

Later in today's worship service, we will pray for the young people and adults going on church trips this summer, including my own trip to Malawi. Now, are these mission trips or evangelism trips? We tend to use the language of mission trips, seeing them as work trips designed to help others. But the young people will be studying scripture and praying with other people, and I'll be called upon to preach. And wherever we go, we will be doing so as Christians, re-presenting what we believe about Jesus Christ through words and deeds. So honestly, we are commissioning people today for mission-evangelism trips.

It's a shame that for many of us, evangelism is a word that makes us feel uncomfortable. Preacher Michael Lindvall tells the story of a woman who worked as a clerk in a bookstore. Shortly after she opened the door and turned on the store lights, a man walked in dressed as a Hasidic Jew. She asked, "May I help you?" to which the man softly replied, "Yes, I would like to know about Jesus." She directed him to the shop's section of books about Jesus and turned to go back when he called to her. "No," he said, "don't show me any more books. Tell me what you believe." The woman admitted that her Presbyterian soul shivered, but she gulped and then told him everything she could think of.¹

Often we'd rather build houses or pack relief supplies for disaster relief than have a face-to-face conversation about who Jesus is—which is ironic because on a deep level, we're building houses and packing relief supplies because of who Jesus is to us. We've come to know this man from Nazareth, this risen Savior, in such a way that our lives make the most sense when we care for others, doing for them what we would have them do for us. Why then does the thought of talking directly with someone else about Jesus make our throats tighten up and our Presbyterian souls shiver?

First off, it has always been challenging to talk about Jesus with others. As we saw in today's gospel lesson, it was even hard for Jesus to talk about Jesus. A few chapters earlier in Mark, Jesus' family had tried in vain to bring him home for his own safety. Now when Jesus finally returns to his home town of Nazareth, the crowd turns on him in anger. Part of that reaction was due to what he said—his message about repentance and that caring for others in need always trumps religious rituals and rules.² But in truth it appears that the biggest problem was that it was Jesus, the local boy, telling them all these things in the synagogue.

Back then Nazareth wasn't a big city at all. It had maybe 400 residents. Everyone knew everyone else and everyone kept to their places. I found a great passage from a book in the Jewish apocrypha, the book of Sirach, which reinforces the idea that a carpenter should not preach to others. Listen: *How can one become wise who handles the plow, who drives oxen and whose talk is about bulls? So it*

*is [also] with every artisan who labors by night and by day; with the smith, sitting by the anvil intent on his iron-work; the potter turning the wheel with his feet. All are skillful in their own work, yet they are not sought out for the council of the people. They cannot expound discipline or judgment nor attain eminence in the public assembly.*³ And yet here's Jesus, the local lad, presuming to buck this scriptural wisdom and teach his elders in the synagogue hall.

That day the twelve disciples witnessed the painful rejection of both Jesus and his message. So imagine what went through their minds when he turned to them and said, "Go now into the nearby villages to preach and teach after my example." They likely gulped and hesitated, quickly trying to prepare what they would say to the strangers they would meet. Knowing their concerns, Jesus did two things to help them. He sent them out two by two, so that they would have companionship for the journey and a colleague to help share the message. And he told them not to take any extra supplies. He wanted them to be utterly transparent in their message. They had no money, no goods to trade, no weapon to threaten others. They would be absolutely dependent on other's hospitality. Which meant that all would see that the only thing they carried was this good news of Jesus Christ. That fact would spark people's curiosity and help them trust the integrity of the apostles. And if not, if people weren't able to open their hearts even a little bit, then the disciples were to keep heading down the road.

Imagine yourself in this group of twelve. You have a companion with you and you are obviously away from home. You are unencumbered with anything representing the world's priorities—your clothes are simple; you're carrying no bag, no lunchbox, no cellphone. You meet someone on the street and ask if they might help you with a bit of food. They may feed you or ask about where you come from or why you're in their town, which could lead to a conversation about how God's kingdom has come close to us here on earth so that we can finally be well, finally be healed, finally be at peace. Can you picture a scenario unfolding like that? Intellectually it seems like this would have been easier in Jesus' day and age when people regularly had to give hospitality to strangers they met on the road. Emotionally it feels like this type of mission-evangelism trip would be hard to carry out in today's cynical, inhospitable age. It sure seemed that way to me, until I looked more closely at the passage from Mark and realized what the secret is to effectively sharing a word about Jesus with family and strangers alike. I'll tell you that secret in a moment, but first an illustration from the life of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

FDR was 39 years old when he contracted polio and lost the use of his legs. In the years of government service that followed, including first being elected President 12 years later, Roosevelt stubbornly refused to be seen in his wheelchair at public events. He would wear painful braces and walk by swinging his useless legs by using his upper body strength, often supported with someone at his side, even as he smiled and waved to the crowds. One of the only exceptions to this rule happened in 1944 when FDR was visiting a hospital in

Oahu that was caring for war veterans who had lost one or more arms and legs in battle. He asked a secret service man to wheel him slowly through these wards, going past each individual bed, vulnerably displaying himself and his useless legs to the soldiers who would have to endure the same bitter reality. One presidential adviser claimed he had never seen Roosevelt with tears in his eyes, but that afternoon in Oahu, as he was wheeled out of the hospital, he was close to them that day.⁴

Think about a crippled FDR and his choice to visit those wounded soldiers long ago. Think about Jesus sitting in his hometown synagogue, teaching in a crowded room with people close at hand who knew him and yet didn't know him. Think of how Jesus cured the sick people brought to him by laying his hands on them. Think of the twelve apostles going out to other villages, talking to strangers one on one, hopefully getting an invitation to their house for a meal and a place to stay; going through their front doors and, as an act of hospitality, having their sandals removed and someone's hands washing their feet; sitting at their table and breaking bread together. Think about these disciples anointing someone who is sick with a prayer and a bit of oil placed on their forehead.

I believe that if you really want to talk about Jesus, you need to do it at arm's length. You need to be within an arm's length of the person: close enough to reach out to them, to shake their hand, to hear with empathy their own stories of pain or grief, to comfort them with an embrace, to place a bit of oil on their forehead. If you intentionally get within an arm's length of someone in need, you'll be surprised how easy it is to say: *"May God be with you. I believe that the grace of Christ can strengthen us, even in tough times like this. I know that the Lord loves you and forgives you, for I've known that same love in my life. You are not alone; Christ has promised never to leave us or forsake us. Can we say a prayer together?"*

The good news of Christ was never designed to be shouted out impersonally through a megaphone or, I'm sorry Mr. Billy Graham, preached in massive crusades in auditorium halls. It was designed to be shared personally, vulnerably, to someone within an arm's reach of us. That type of witness is both mission and evangelism. It involves eye-contact and open hearts, and as such is one of the easiest ways to talk about Jesus.

That's the secret about sharing your faith—a reminder for everyone going on church trips this summer, and for every one of you as you leave this worship service today. Remember, you are never more than an arm's length away from Christ's loving embrace—ever! Be sure and follow that example when you go forth to tell others by word and deed about God's love and Christ's amazing grace.

AMEN

¹ Michael Lindvall, Feasting on the Word, Proper 9 Year B, p. 216. In Lindvall's version, the woman is Episcopalian.

² Cf. Mark 2:23-28

³ Sirach 38:24-34, selected verses

⁴ Doris Kearns Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 1994, pp. 532-3.