

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 22, 2012
Pentecost 8
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 57:14-21
Psalm 22:22-30
Ephesians 2:1-12
Mark 6:30-44

For those of you who were here last week, you will remember that in the Gospel lesson Jesus paired his disciples together and sent them out as his ambassadors to announce to people that God's reign had come down from heaven and was now present on the earth.

In today's Gospel lesson, we find the disciples returning from their mission and briefing Jesus about all that has occurred on their little "ministry tour."

But for those who follow the lectionary readings closely, you will have noticed that the passage which has Jesus sending the disciples out occurs in verses 6-13, and this text which finds the disciples returning from their mission occurs in verses 30-44.

So, for those following closely, you may be asking, "what happened to verses 14-29?"

It's a good question. Remember a few weeks ago how I told you that Mark employs a technique where he sandwiches a story in the middle of another story?

We're not sure why he does this, but one reason may be that he wants the two stories to be understood in relation to one another.

Well, that's what is happening here. Sandwiched between Jesus sending the disciples out to preach and their return to report to Jesus all that has happened, Mark takes us on a little "detour." It's the story of how King Herod throws himself a lavish birthday party. At the party, Herod's daughter dances for the guests, and because of it Herod decides to grant her anything she desires.

She tells her father that she wants the head of John the Baptist on a plate. So, Herod has John executed. It's a rather gruesome and depressing story, and I can understand why the lectionary compilers would leave it out. But I don't think we can fully understand the story of Jesus sending the disciples out to preach, and their subsequent return, apart from this story of John the Baptist's violent death. The disciples' mission *begins* just as John's mission *ends*, and we must sit up and take note of this.

There are two things I want to lift out of this Gospel lesson for us this morning. The first is this: *the success of the disciples' mission is tempered by, and even overshadowed by, John's violent death.*

The disciples are overjoyed -- and rightly so-- that as they go out preaching, people respond to the message, and they witness amazing and even miraculous

things. They are amazed and happy that as they minister in Jesus' name, they see tangible and positive results to their ministry.

But Mark sandwiches this story of John's death in here for a reason. I think it's his way of reminding those to whom he writes that they should not be naive about what their ministry for Jesus is going to involve. In addition to the good and positive things they see, they are also going to encounter resistance and opposition. At times that opposition will be brutal and even violent.

Mark wants to wipe the scales of naivete from the disciples' eyes, and ours. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a very subversive message. It is an affront to the powers that be, especially the powers of the empire. The lesson of John the Baptist's death is clear: if you take on the ruling authorities, prepare for some heavy fallout. (More about this in the Afterword, as we discuss the Epistle.)

The second item I want us to see is related to our discussion last week about how the church's ministry is to be done in complete dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

Remember last week how Jesus sends the disciples out, and he instructs them to travel light and to be dependent not only upon their hosts in a given village, but upon the Holy Spirit for all they say and do.

As we arrive at the text this week, it's almost as if Mark feels the need to show his faith community a concrete example of this principle in action. Maybe he

feels this is necessary because it can be easy for us to say that we depend upon the Holy Spirit, but in actual practice we try to accomplish much of the work ourselves.

So, here's what happens. The disciples come back from their tour and they say, "wow, this is great. We did what you told us and we saw amazing things. People responded and came to faith. People were healed. It was like we were superheroes or something."

So Jesus says, "great, now let's get away to a quiet place and rest." But the crowds have become so large that it is impossible. The bulging mass of people look to Jesus like sheep without a shepherd. The priestly and religious "shepherds" charged with caring for them have instead let them down and oppressed them. So Jesus is moved with compassion and he teaches them.

It's late, they are all in a remote place, and the disciples tell Jesus to send the crowds away so that they can find food.

And what does Jesus say? Jesus' response peels away their superhero costumes. He says, "*you* feed them."

"But it's impossible," they reply.

"I know," says Jesus. "Do it anyway."

Now it's one thing for the church to say that we depend upon the Holy Spirit to carry out our work. But at some point in the journey you run into a situation like

this, a situation where the challenge of ministry is so daunting, so gargantuan, so overwhelming as to be impossible from a human point of view. You find yourselves called and compelled to do it. But you're left with your jaws on the ground and your arms open, saying: "How? With what?"

In this case Jesus starts with *where* the disciples are, and with *what* they have available. And he does for them what they could never do by themselves.

Last week in the Afterword I shared with you that I wondered whether God might be calling on Epworth to do something that would only be possible by God's divine and miraculous intervention. I've thought a lot about that this week, as have many of you.

I believe that we will continue to be open to the Spirit's leading. But I also believe that one of the fruits of the last two weeks has been (for me, at least) that God is reminding me that I need to have faith *again* in the great and wondrous things that can come about from this congregation of people.

This congregation was born and exists today because of mind-boggling faith. In many ways it was a financial impossibility that we could buy this building and move to this location from our initial home of the "hilltop garage." But here we are.

When this congregation was born twelve years ago, we were doing something that was ground-breaking, something that no one else was daring to do.

Twelve years later, there are churches that model much of what they do on what we have done. There are now discussion groups on Facebook carrying on a conversation that *we* began twelve years ago! Books have been written, and a dissertation was just successfully defended, showing forth the benefits of the model we have been demonstrating for twelve years! Liturgical models are now gaining a hearing in many non-liturgical traditions, due in part to the ministry of Epworth. Truth be told, Epworth was liturgy when liturgy wasn't cool!

And I wonder what, if anything, God might be saying to us here at Epworth now that we're twelve years into our story? Where do we go from here?

Wherever that is, one thing is clear: we will need to depend upon the Holy Spirit *now* even as we did *then*. Our love for God, and for one another, will need to be full and pure now, even as it was then.

As we come to the table this morning, let us continue to open our hearts to God's presence in our midst. Let us receive with gladness the grace he offers us. And let us go forth trusting His good grace for the present and future, even as we did in the past.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.