

Pentecost 6, 2021 (July 4) (Mk 6:1-13; Ezek 2:1-5; 2 Cor 12:2-10) SERMON

Since the beginning of Mark's gospel, Jesus has been preaching, teaching, and healing everywhere he went. Two weeks ago we read about the healing of a demon-possessed gentile. Last week he returned to the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee, where he healed a very important person, the 12-year-old daughter of a wealthy man. He also healed a social outcast, a nameless woman who'd been bleeding for 12 years, which made her ritually unclean. It's been a very successful journey for him and his disciples.

But today, Jesus is frustrated! He's left the coast and returned to his hometown, Nazareth. As a former member of the synagogue there, he's been invited to read the appointed scroll for the Sabbath. Mark tells us that **many who heard him were "amazed."**

"Who is this guy? What does he think he's doing, trying to teach us—and how on earth can he be performing miracles?" I can almost hear them saying, "This is Jesus, for God's sake! We went to *shul* together!" And they were greatly offended.

This is one of the gospel stories that has variations in Matthew and Luke. In Luke's version, the keeper of the scriptures handed Jesus the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. You know how you can scroll down a page on the computer to find something?

Well, Jesus scrolled down through Isaiah and found this passage, which he read to them: **The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.** He ended the reading with his own words: **Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**

And then he completely blew it by telling them how God had favored *gentiles* by sending them two bold Hebrew prophets, Elijah and Elisha.

Listen to this in the context of Jewish identity, then and now. The Jews were God's chosen people. God had made covenant with them: with Noah; with Abraham; with Moses and the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai; with David.

And a thousand years later came the *new* covenant, sealed by the holy and precious blood of Jesus at the end of his earthly ministry. This was the *new covenant* that promised forgiveness of sin, and of sins, for all who desired it.

The Hebrew people—the “most favored nation”—clung fast to the promises of God. But they didn't do such a good job of remembering *their* part of the commitment. They were greatly offended at the reminder that God had also favored *gentiles*.

I want to share with you something forwarded to me by my friend Janet, who found it on line from an organization called *The Happy Givers*, based in Puerto Rico. The author is Bixby Knolls.

*THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: Moabites are bad. They were not to be allowed to dwell among God's people (Deuteronomy 23). BUT THEN comes the story of “Ruth the Moabite” (an ancestor of David, and thus of Jesus), which challenges the prejudice against Moabites.*

*THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: People from Uz are evil (Jeremiah 25). BUT THEN comes the story of Job, a man from Uz who was “the most blameless man on earth.”*

*THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: No foreigners or eunuchs allowed (Deuteronomy 23). BUT THEN comes the story of an African eunuch welcomed into the church (Acts 8).*

*THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: God's people hated Samaritans. BUT THEN Jesus tells a story that shows not all Samaritans were bad (Luke 10).*

*THE STORY MAY BEGIN with prejudice, discrimination, & animosity, but the Spirit moves God's people towards openness, welcome, inclusion, acceptance, & affirmation.*

Some of us were taught to read and understand the Bible in a certain way. For me personally, I can't even say I was taught until I got to seminary. "Religion" was something I was comfortable with growing up. It meant, when I was a young teen, that I could "go to church" and sing in the choir.

Since "religion" had no more meaning than that for me, it meant I could completely drop out of church when I went to college—when my mother could no longer "make me" go to church. But it also meant that a few years later, when I found myself in deep depression, I knew I could "go back to church." Those years when I was forced to attend worship had at least taught me that there was more to God, more to faith, than singing anthems with the choir and hymns with the congregation.

My seminary studies were one of the greatest blessings in my life, because I learned to understand the *context*, the meaning behind the words of the Hebrew or Greek Old Testament, and the Greek New Testament. I "met God again for the first time" (a book by Marcus Borg) as an all-powerful Maker who established the stars in their courses and came up with an amazing and awesome creation that provided everything needed by humankind. *We* were the crowning point of creation. *We* were the ones to whom God gave *dominion* over all. *Dominion* doesn't mean the *right* to do anything we want, but rather the *stewardship*—the *caretaking*—over every created thing, animal, mineral, and vegetable.

*Context* is important in our everyday lives. Today, as we celebrate the anniversary of our nation's birth, I invite you to remember not the National Anthem, but the Pledge of Allegiance, which contains these words: "One Nation under God, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all."

Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, died so that we might be free. *We* and *all* people. He died to take away the guilt of our sins. Before his death, he sent out his twelve disciples, two by two. **They went out and preached that people should repent.**

As we give thanks today for the freedom we enjoy in our country, please remember that not all people share that same freedom. Amen.