

Appointed to Serve

Mark 6:1-13

¹ He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ² On 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! ³ Is 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. ⁴ Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." ⁵ And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶ And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷ He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹ but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰ He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹ If 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." ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³ They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Have you ever felt that you get limited or no respect from the people with whom you grew up? You are not alone! Our reading includes two passages: first, the end of Jesus' successful healing journeys and rejection back home ([6:1-6](#)), followed by a section in which Jesus extends his mission by sending his disciples ([6:7-13](#)). Together the passages link the limited perspectives on Jesus by people who should know him best with the unlimited potential of his new inner circle, even though up to then they too had misunderstood the meaning of Jesus' ministry.

The place from which Jesus left to go "home" to Nazareth was the Capernaum side of the Sea of Galilee ([5:21](#)). Nazareth lies further inland. In Nazareth, Jesus went to the local synagogue on the Sabbath. Mark describes the reaction of the local villagers to one of their own doing so well. They could hardly believe it ("they were amazed"). Jesus had a hearing in the synagogue because of the notoriety of his travels away from home, including the stories about his healings and teachings. The villagers asked, "Where did this man get these things, what wisdom was given to him, what powers come through his

hands?" (v. 2). Yet upon hearing him, they remembered that this was just "the carpenter, Mary's son" (v. 3a). Even if his father Joseph had died by that time, to identify Jesus as his mother's son rather than his father's might have been intended as an insult, shaming Jesus by insinuating that he did not have a father. Also, his status as a carpenter (*tektōn*, a worker with wood) did not normally prepare one to be such a wise man and healer. The mention of his brothers and sisters highlights that this was a family the villagers knew well enough to deny that Jesus could possibly be the successful preacher touted by outsiders. After all, a mere woodworker, while important to the economy of small villages like Nazareth, could not be expected to do great things. Thus, they were "scandalized" or "offended" by him (v. 3).

Jesus responded to their doubts with a saying: "Prophets are not without honor except in their own hometown" (6:4), a proverb well known throughout the Jewish and Greco-Roman world. He expanded it to include the hometown, relatives, and the prophet's very own household. The result of their lack of faith in Jesus' abilities was a decreased number of healings that he could do. While the villagers were "astounded" at his teaching and miracles (v. 2), because of where he was from (from among them!), Jesus was "amazed" at their lack of faith (6:6a). Throughout his healing ministry, especially in the just completed set of trips across the sea and back, the faith of those he encountered secured their healing. Only disciples (4:40) and, then, fellow Nazarenes lacked faith. So Jesus left and went to the other villages to teach (6:6b). He could not remain too long among those who lacked faith.

After calling his first disciples (1:16-20), Jesus performed his first healing, casting out "an unclean spirit" (1:26). Then he sent out his disciples with the authority to do the same (6:7). You remember at the outset of his ministry, he confronted opposition from religious leaders for healing on the Sabbath (3:1-6). Shortly thereafter, he appointed twelve disciples as apostles ("sent ones") and instructed them to be with him; later he sent them out with his authority (3:14). After facing opposition in his own hometown, the time

had come to send out these twelve disciples without him, but two by two, to carry out the mission of healing and delivering people from their demons.

Jesus gave instructions to the disciples about what to wear, what not to take, and how to react to their receptions. They were to have the bare minimum: take just a staff to help you walk and ward off wild animals, wear sandals and one tunic, but not two (v. 8). In other words, itinerant preachers in the Jesus movement depend on the hospitality of settled believers in the various communities to which they traveled. When they came to one place, they were to stay in the first home that received them (v. 10). There should be no appearance of looking for the best meals or the most comfortable bed in town! However, should their message be rejected at a home or by an entire town, they should exercise the practice of "shaking the dust from one's feet" (v. 11). Rabbis in later traditions talked of this symbolic way of returning from Gentile lands to one's sacred spaces. Followers of Jesus may have used the practice to symbolize judgment on unrepentant places, or, the shaking off of dust could be a hopeful sign if such people and places would thereby see the seriousness of the matter and mend their ways. **Efrain Agosto**

Jesus could not give authority he did not already possess. Jesus, deriving his authority from absolute and obedient faith in God, shared his authority willingly with those who shared in his faith. This reminds us what Bonhoeffer taught. The disciples' initial foray as missionaries (v. 13) was not reward for their growing faith. It was rather a sign that faith brings authority—and *authority brings responsibility*. We respond to the gift of faith by *accepting our authority* alongside the sovereign to whom we answer, and we take up the *responsibility of disciples* to proclaim, to heal, and to claim victory over evil. **Mark D. W. Edington**

Mark tells us that the disciples did in fact go out, preached, and casted out demons. People repented as John the Baptist (1:4) and Jesus (1:15) before them said they should.

In addition, the traditional healing balm of oil was used to relieve "many sick people" of their infirmities. **Efrain Agosto**

Jesus continues to commission us as he commissioned the Twelve to go out "among the villages" in pairs to heal and preach, with instructions about how to respond to the rejection that they also would encounter. Many of us make sharp distinctions between "mission" and "evangelism"—between outreach in deeds and outreach in words—sometimes gravitating toward one out of anxiety about doing the other. It is clear that both Jesus' ministry in Nazareth and that of the Twelve to "the villages" were composed of both healing—"mission"—and proclamation—"evangelism."

There are modern day examples of striking a balance between word and deed. Following the horrific South Asian tsunami that struck the day after Christmas 2004, relief poured in from many quarters, including aid from American Christians, some of whom used the opportunity to offer physical assistance (mission) to proclaim the gospel to aid recipients (evangelism).

Another powerful illustration of the integrity and balance between "doing" the word and "speaking" the word was offered by one Hugh Thompson at the commencement exercises at Emory University several years ago. Honorary degrees were being awarded; the recipients made the requisite speeches. As is often the case, the students chatted through the whole ceremony. In fact, there was only one moment when they actually listened. "It was when a man named Hugh Thompson was speaking. Thompson was probably the least educated man on the platform....He...did not finish college, choosing instead to enlist in the Army, where he became a helicopter pilot.

"On March 16, 1968, he was flying a routine patrol in Vietnam when he happened to fly over the village of Mai Lai just as American troops, under the command of Lieutenant William Calley, were slaughtering dozens of unarmed...villagers—old men, women, and children. Thompson set his helicopter down between the troops and the remaining...civilians. He ordered his tail-gunner to train the helicopter guns on the

American soldiers, and he ordered the gunmen to stop killing the villagers....Hugh Thompson's actions saved the lives of dozens of people...he was almost court-martialed....It was thirty years before the Army...awarded him the Soldier's Medal.

"As he stood at the microphone, the...rowdy student body grew still." And then Thompson talked about his faith. Simple words. Speaking of what his parents taught him as a child Thompson said, "they taught me, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'" The students were amazed at these "words of Jesus, words from Sunday school, words from worship, words of Christian testimony...they leapt to their feet and gave him a standing ovation."

Thompson's words about his faith had weight because the man had obviously "walked the talk." In the same way, the church will not be heard if what we *do* as Christians is incongruous with what we *say* about our faith.

We don't want to be pushy Christians in witnessing to our faith. Such discomfort is widespread, especially for those of us who may be justifiably concerned about coercive or emotionally manipulative methods of proclaiming the Good News. The story is told about a Christian woman who worked as a clerk in a bookstore. When she arrived for work one morning, she encountered a man dressed as a Hasidic Jew. After turning on the lights she said, "Would you like any help?" "Yes," he answered softly, "I would like to know about Jesus." She directed him upstairs to the shop's section of books about Jesus and turned to go back downstairs, but he called her back. "No," he said, "Don't show me any more books, tell me what you believe." "My Episcopal soul shivered," the woman said later. But she gulped and told him everything she could think of.

God-talk outside the walls of the church makes many of us anxious. We don't want to be pushy or to offend, and we are not sure we know the right words. Many of us would sooner talk about *anything* else: sex, their salary, anything but what they believe about God.

But this text insists that, in spite of the potential for rejection (or at least anxiety or embarrassment), telling the story with words is part of the claim that Christ lays upon his disciples. Our task is to tell why we believe and have integrity between word and deed as illustrated in the story about Hugh Thompson. Evangelism is not "to get them on our side" or even "to grow the church," but simply to tell others about the God who has come to mean so much to us. Our action as mission and evangelism is to be out of love, not competition or anxiety. We need not have polished words, sophisticated theology, or fine-tuned doctrine to speak of their faith. We are simply called to speak truth in love, from the heart, in our own words, and never be ashamed. **Michael L. Lindvall**

We, like the disciples, have been appointed to serve and witness. The word for us in this text is that we are not held responsible for the response to our ministries in Christ's name, but only for our own faithfulness. With such assurance, we can serve and witness boldly and faithfully. **Beverly Zink-Sawyer**

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