

Sermon on Mark 6:1-13  
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 5, 2009  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

On this morning after a night of fireworks and two days of celebrating the declaration of Independence on this Fourth of July holiday weekend, it's time for us Christians to come back down to earth, and face reality. It's another Sunday morning in the middle of the summer, and we are gathering as one of many congregations in the midst of this city, to worship God and declare our allegiance to the one whom God sent to give us life forever, Jesus of Nazareth. On a weekend when we rightly remember heroes of the American Revolution, like George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Betsy Ross, sing a song written by Francis Scott Key, and think of great leaders like Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglas, we are reminded today of the one who has called us to follow him first and foremost, the Son of God. It is not to negate the courage or leadership of those heroes of our nation, and those who died to make us all free – we do remember and rightly honor them – but we do need to keep our priorities straight and remember to worship God alone and follow Jesus as Lord. For he is the one who died and rose again, to set the whole world free from sin and death.

So I call your attention today to our lesson from the gospel when Jesus returned to his hometown, Nazareth, where he grew up as the son of Mary, a carpenter's son, with brothers named James, Joses, Judas and Simon (and additional unnamed sisters) – nobody special to those who knew him as such. Jesus had just left the towns by the sea of Galilee, where he had shown his power from God by exorcizing a legion of unclean spirit, healing a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years, and raising Jairus's daughter from the dead, to the amazement of all. Following these acts of power, Jesus returned home, leading his disciples. He taught in his home synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. They wondered, "Where did he get all this wisdom? Isn't he the carpenter's son? Don't we know him, his mother, his brothers, and his sisters?" And so instead of being inspired by their hometown hero, they took offense at him. Jesus could do no works of power, because of their lack of faith (though he did lay hands on a few sick people, and healed them). This time it was Jesus who was astounded, at his hometown's lack of faith.

I guess Jesus experienced first hand what many of us may experience ourselves: that no matter how much we achieve out in the world once we leave home, when we return we remain in many eyes nothing more than the person we were before we left. We're still our parents' son, or our siblings brother or sister. For Jesus, that meant in many's eyes he was nothing more than a carpenter's son, who could never amount to more. He could become the savior of the world, and

amaze everyone with his insights and teachings, but in Nazareth he was just Jesus, who lived down the block. They were offended that he now seemed to be much more than that – a thought which was beyond their imagination. Just as the faith of those who had sought mercy from Jesus had led to their healing, so the lack of faith in Nazareth kept Jesus from being able to do anything to heal anyone there.

So Jesus moved on, to other villages around Nazareth teaching the people about God's compassionate love. Then he called his disciples together, and sent them out two by two, giving them authority over unclean spirits. With nothing but the shoes on their feet and the clothes on their backs, they went to the towns and villages preaching the good news of God, casting out demons, anointing the sick with oil and healing many. The disciples later returned, filled with stories about what they could do with the authority and power that Jesus had given them.

So what can we learn from this lesson today? One thing seems clear: that we should not be offended by those who come to us, in Jesus' name, and challenge us with insights into the kingdom of God. We should be open to the work of the Spirit, and the Word of God speaking through the voice of those whom Christ and his Church have sent to us. Not that preachers are always right (we're not!), but the Word of God almost always comes to us through fallible, human voices. If we are offended by a teaching from one of God's messengers, we should perhaps think about what is offending us, and what the Spirit may be trying to tell us. Maybe our tension can lead us to greater clarity, and new insights from God about our life!

The second lesson is perhaps even more important. Jesus sent out his disciples to do everything he had done, healing and proclaiming good news – and they did! They were amazed by the power they had, through faith. So Jesus sends you and me out into the world, in order to share with others the good news of Jesus' love. You may think that you don't have anything to share, that God can't be sending you, but you're wrong! God has called you in baptism, to be witnesses to God's grace in Jesus Christ, who died for us all, and was raised to life again in order to give life forever to everyone who believes. That's the real power of faith in God: it gives us the ability to realize the life that God has promised us all!

But here's the rub. If you and I don't do anything with this call, nothing will be accomplished. If we don't believe, we are powerless. If we don't believe, we won't answer the call, and won't get up out of our seats and do anything. Jesus' call depends, in large part, on our answering the call! It would be like a football quarterback, barking out the signals, and if nobody moves when he says "hike", then nothing positive will happen. Not even Brett Favre can complete a pass if nobody moves! If you know how to read, but never open a book, you'll never learn a thing! If you have a gift, but don't use it, you might as well not have it!

So most of us seem to think that we don't have sufficient gifts or faith to accomplish what Jesus may be calling us to do. But every one of us have been given some unique gift that we can share with others. When we have gifts or

talents, the world teaches us to use them to benefit ourselves, to make money, achieve fame or get power over others. But God teaches us, through Jesus' example, to use our gifts to help others, to share a portion of our financial gifts with those in need, to give God the glory, and use our power for justice and the common good. You don't have to be a world-famous chef to give the gift of a home-cooked meal to someone who needs it, or share your food with the hungry! You don't have to be a surgeon to share the gift of healing, by praying for others or by showing compassion for those who suffer. You don't have to be a university professor to share the gift of reading with a child or literacy with an adult. You don't have to be an opera singer to sing a hymn of praise to Jesus, and you don't have to be a preacher to share the story of God's love with someone who needs to hear it! We all have a gift that we can share, when Jesus sends us out!

It all depends on faith, having love for God and neighbor, and being open to Jesus' call when it comes. For the disciples didn't have any more talent than you or me. They were simple fishermen (and one was a tax collector), with less school education than any one of us in America today! But they did sit at the feet of Jesus, learning from him the insights he shared about the love and mercy of God. They were often slow to understand, and they probably doubted their ability to do what Jesus was asking them to do. But they did go when Jesus sent them (two by two – so that they wouldn't chicken out!), to share the good news of God's kingdom with strangers in all those towns and villages. They must have been scared to death, at first, but they did it – and were amazed at the power of faith and love to bring hope and healing to the many people they met.

You and I, too, can be amazed at what the power of faith and God's love can do in our lives when we open our hearts to Jesus' call. Today Jesus is calling you and me to do great things in his name, in actions both great and small, in response to his love. God is also calling you and me to be open to the witness of others who speak to us in Jesus' name. So whether you are a witness, or are receiving a witness, do so with faith and in the spirit of love, so that the power of God can do its work. Whether it is welcoming a stranger or greeting a visitor in Jesus' name, it is faith and love that gives our welcome its power. It is faith and love that makes the gift of food a meal that satisfies the hungry. It is faith and love that makes our financial gifts a thankoffering to God that builds up the Church. So whatever gift you have, give it with faith and love, and it will have a special power from God to bear fruit beyond measure. For faith and love, combined with God's power, changes the world!

May God give each one of us the faith and the love to listen to God's Word as it comes to us, and to hear Jesus' call that sends us out to share his word of love with others. Thanks be to God! Amen.