

Sermon on Mark 6:1-13  
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 5, 2015  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

You hear a lot in the church these days about *hospitality*. Everyone wants to be a good host. We want to welcome people, and make them feel at home. So in churches we post greeters at our doors and put welcome words on our church signs, and in our church bulletins. We share the peace in worship, and say that all are welcome at our Lord's table. But is welcome really in our hearts, or are these just words? For the truth is, hospitality is so much more than just placing an "All Are Welcome" mat on our front doorstep, or on the church's outdoor sign.

Today in the gospel, we hear about Jesus coming home to Nazareth after traveling around Galilee and beyond, preaching the good news, and healing the sick. When he came to his hometown, you would expect his own people to welcome him, right? Maybe, at first. (I wonder if they had a "Welcome" sign over their door?) In the synagogue he began to preach his powerful message about God's kingdom, and everyone was astounded by the power of his words. They wondered, "Where did this man (whom we have known since he was a boy) get all this? How did he get so wise and powerful? Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" They thought of all of his brothers and sisters who lived among them, and wondered how it could be that such powerful words could come from one who had once been so familiar, and so ordinary that he had never been noticed! *And they took offense at him.* So much for the hospitality and welcome! Jesus could feel the sneers and the doubt, and felt as unwelcome as a snowstorm in July. So he said to them, "*Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.*" And he could do no deeds of power there, no miracles – except for a few healing. Even Jesus was amazed at their unbelief.

I'm sure it made him recall the words of God from the prophet Ezekiel, when God had sent him to speak to the people in exiles in Babylon: "*I am sending you to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me...their descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God, 'Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house); they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.'*"

So immediately Jesus left Nazareth, to teach in other villages. And the scripture says that he called the twelve and sent them out two by two, carrying only a staff, and enter only the homes where they received him. If they didn't welcome them, they should leave, and shake the dust off their feet. But many must have welcomed them, because they returned to Jesus and reported that many had repented, they had cast out many demons and anointed many with oil and many

who were sick and healed them. So the receptiveness and hospitality of the people in the homes they visited in all those visited made a great difference. The disciples found faith out there, and found this gave them great power.

Fast forward two thousand years, to the present day in America. Just over two weeks ago, a young man who was white, entered an African Methodist Episcopal church where he had never been before, looking to see the pastor. He was welcomed warmly by the congregation, and invited to join their Bible study, which he did. But after an hour, he stood up, told them what he was about to do, and proceeded to shoot nine innocent people dead. He was white, and they were African Americans, so he said, “you have to die.” And he shot them dead. The warm hospitality the church and its pastor had offered him, he returned with bullets.

Forgiveness of the young man was given by some of the families whose loved ones had been killed, who refused to hate him for his actions, or become involved in seeking retribution. A mind-boggling example of grace. Since then, many white Americans, including governors and legislators, felt remorse for the Confederate flags still flying in southern states. They said they should come down.

Then eight Black churches burned down in the American South in the following week -not all of them by arson, but some of them were. So, more suffering and loss, for the Church, that has been for hundreds of years the center of Black communities. What are we to make of this, we Christians in the north, whose heritage is Lutheran? Is there any connection with our inability to integrate across racial lines in the north, as well as the south? What can we learn from the witness of our African American brothers and sisters in Christian congregations, at this present time? Is this the kind of discipleship Jesus was talking about when he sent out the twelve into the world? Sharing radical forgiveness and mercy even to those who show hatred, and not love?

I think these recent events make even more urgent the scripture lessons we read today. In our second lesson, the Apostle Paul said, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”*

These words have always been a mystery to us...we can spend a lifetime seeking the meaning to these words. Where is the gospel in all this experience of cruelty, hardship and persecutions – for the sake of Christ? But here’s the good news: repentance, reconciliation, restoration, forgiveness, hospitality, all showing the power of love that builds up versus the evil power of hate which destroys! We can learn the power of God perfected in our human weakness, by observing the faithful witness of these African American Christians in such trials by fire.

And so, on that Sunday morning after the shooting of the pastor and eight other beloved members, Mother Emanuel AME Church opened their doors to the world for worship – in the midst of their mourning, to share their grief and the joy of the gospel of hope and resurrection. And the Black churches in the south that have burned, some by arson, some by still unknown cases, show their determination and witness of hope by still gathering to worship on Sunday!

So what does hospitality – based on Christian faith - then look like for us? Standing with our Black brothers and sisters as we pray together in grief for those who were murdered by a gunman in church, to work together against the idolatry of white supremacy and racism, and to seek justice and equity in our communities in education, housing, employment, and the criminal justice system.

Hospitality is so much more than writing an affirmation of welcome in our service sheets – it is living it out in our daily lives in the world, during the week! On Sunday it is welcoming all who come to the Lord's table of grace, to receive Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine. It is blessing all couples who wish to share their promise of love and faithfulness in marriage, regardless of gender. It's inviting the community into the church to eat, or to seek support in their times of need – and it's going out into the community being vulnerable ourselves, to listen and to learn. It's inviting Hmong elders to till a garden on our south lawn, so that they can teach their children and youth the traditional farming methods of their culture, in their own way.

For just as Jesus sent out his disciples into the villages of Galilee to share the good news, totally dependent on the grace and hospitality of others, you and I also are being sent today, out the doors of this church, to share God's message of justice and peace, mercy, forgiveness and love – not just in words, but in all that we do. But to do this involves not only what WE bring and share, but also what we are willing to receive, making ourselves vulnerable to listen and to learn. To listen to those whom we may never have heard before, and to learn what we have perhaps closed our eyes to and never knew. To make ourselves vulnerable and humble enough to listen, instead of always speaking.

So we pray that our eyes and ears may be opened, to the Word of God and to the experience and perspective of our neighbors, and that we would have the will and the courage to answer God's call and go out as disciples with the humility of Christ. It may be that only then will we experience the true healing that God gives, which is not provided by us or our expertise, but through the mercy and forgiveness that we give AND receive from our neighbors in mutual love. Perhaps this is the key to understanding Paul's words, of *the power made perfect in weakness.*” And then we may learn the true meaning of how it is in our vulnerability, and knowing our weakness, that we find our true strength! Amen.