

Mark 6:1-13

6:1 He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.

6:2 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!

6:3 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.

6:4 Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

6:5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.

6:6 And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

6:7 He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.

6:8 He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts;

6:9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.

6:10 He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.

6:11 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."

6:12 So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.

6:13 They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Realizing the Possible

More than four hundred years ago, the earliest Baptists that emerged in England and Holland, held tight to the idea of a believer's baptism. Back in those days, the Church and State were one entity. To be baptized into the Anglican Church was to become a citizen of England. Our faith ancestors believed this to be a coercive practice; no reasonable person would refuse baptism, because to do so would be to forfeit fundamental rights, not to mention a sense of belonging. And of course, what infant would be of sound enough mind to make such a weighty decision for themselves?

Instead, these new clusters of practicing Christians believed that people should enter baptismal waters only when they were compelled by the Holy Spirit. Additionally, they believed that each person had soul freedom – that is the full right to be the judge of their own spiritual competency, a matter for individual and Creator alone.

These ideas seem rather innocuous in 2024, but in Seventeenth Century England, such talk was treasonous. And many of the earliest Baptists were drowned for their beliefs, an extremely cruel way to disparage their practice of adult immersion.

As we gather this morning, on Fourth of July weekend, I hope it's not lost on us that generations of our ancestors suffered abuse, torment, ridicule, loss of status and livelihood, property and home, even death for their determination to be bound by liberty of conscience.

We get to be Millbrook – that is we get to be a community where free souls are encouraged to seek the divine, to share their God-given gifts with one another, and to express their theology without fear of shame, threat, or regret – we get to be Millbrook, because our predecessors ensured such freedoms. As a matter of fact, several Baptists were signers of the Declaration of Independence, and insisted that religious liberty be a tenet of their new nation.

But if we're honest, we also know that while our faith ancestors worked tirelessly to secure the religious freedoms of privileged people, more often than not, they did so at the direct expense of Indigenous, African, and Caribbean peoples, as well as women.

Slavery, colonization, patriarchy, commerce, war, extinction, segregation, assimilation have all been justified as necessary evils in the propagation of gospel. And the lingering effects of such justification still haunt us, wound us, us, limit us today.

So...there's a tension. For Two-Hundred-Forty-Eight Years, a wonderful document has articulated some of the highest values of humanity: the equality of all persons, and the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the

pursuit of happiness. And yet “ALL persons” has too often meant “SOME persons.”

In today’s passage, we meet a man before he’s famous. He’s grown up being told about a God who promises life – that is a world where a person’s needs are met, where their value is recognized, where they find symmetry and harmony with their neighbors, where their gifts are an expression of God’s love and God’s good purposes in the world. And this man is steeped in a jubilee world – that’s an environment where neighbor, land, and God live in covenant with one another, a pattern of ongoing renewal and hope. But when Jesus comes back home to preach the very same message he has been taught by his own faith community, he is rejected by his village. And soundly.

And afterwards, Jesus will send his disciples out two by two; they are equipped with the same knowledge and authority. And chances are, they’ll be met with similar skepticism. Sure, everyone knows about the high ideals, it’s just that most people don’t really believe that such ideals or expectations should actually be met. And like Jesus, they’ll heal a few folks, and love on a few folks, and share a meal or two, and engage in sacred conversations. And they’ll go on to the next village, looking for a few more folks to share in this life. And just like our founding fathers, and just like you and me, they’ll struggle with making this full life for everybody accessible to more than just the somebodies of the world.

Today, on July 7th, 2024, we gather as citizens of a country that tells us our potential is possible. And we read from sacred texts that tell us about a God whose love can transcend the expectations and imagination of this world: individual lives can change; communities can be transformed; God’s world will once more be God’s world.

But I gotta tell you, I don't wanna keep talking about the possible if we aren't willing to do the hard work of making it reality. I don't want to live in a world where my neighbor *might* thrive; I want to live in a world where my neighbor *does* thrive. I don't want to theorize about what *might* happen if we got to hear a hometown prophet; I want to be part of a community that regularly engages with prophets from every zip code in our city, and provoked by their challenges, responds to the needs of neighbors near and far. I don't want to simply *wake up* people to injustice in order that we might prove our righteousness; I want to be part of a community that strives to *awaken* forgiveness, and openness, and creativity, and healing, and reconciliation, re-purposing, and welcomes people into such an endeavor.

Listen, let's fire up the grill, run through the sprinkler, shoot off some fireworks...we've certainly earned it! But how about afterwards, we try to be receptive to the prophets among us? And maybe, each of us can grab a buddy, and take some leftover casserole to our neighbors, or ask them if they want light a bottle rocket, too? Or maybe we can just imagine expressing our love to others as a way to help realize equality and life for those around us? And then...this is the most important part...then we do it again the next day, and the next, and the next. And we keep on doing it!!!

Sure, we may have to shake a little dust off our feet. But a few more people getting to experience the fullness of life...yeah, I'd say that's worth it!

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.