

*Lectionary 14*

July 8, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 6:1-13)

[Jesus] came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. 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! 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. Then Jesus 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 deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refused to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them. So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Going to college is about trying new things. It's about being exposed to new ideas and having new experiences. Which is why, in 1977, I joined the William and Mary fencing team. Who'd have thought? You know, gangly, awkward fencer. I had the whole getup: the white padded jacket, the mask with the screen on the front, and a long shiny foil. I looked like a fencer. And I was really bad at it. I never quite connected my hands to my head. Oh, I did the sprints and the strength exercises; I sparred with my teammates. But let's just say it was not my finest hour.

I remember going up to Charlottesville for a match against the University of Virginia. I found myself on the strip with another young woman who was easily as clueless as I was. And soon after we started, we ended up locked together, each trying to just manhandle the swords from each other's hand. We were pushing to get it out of the way. Finally, she overpowered me and came in for the point. Ouch!

Afterwards, I said to my coach, "I just wasn't strong enough." And he shook his head and said, "No. Your problem is, you think this is about strength. It's not. If you had just tapped her foil it would have gone out of the way, you could have taken the point. Your problem is, you think it's about strength."

Jesus started strong in his ministry. He goes all over Galilee preaching, "*The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the good news.*" He heals the sick; he casts out demons. Most recently, he had stilled a windstorm on the Sea of Galilee. He gave healing and community to a man who had lived naked and screaming in the tombs of Gerasene. He saw a woman healed by just touching him. And he raised a girl from the dead.

It's going really well. He's strong, on top of his game. He showed power over creation, power over evil, and sickness, and even death. Everybody wanted to be near him, to hear him, to touch him, to get his autograph, to take a selfie.

And then Jesus went home. Even that started really strong. People were saying, "*Where did he get all this? What is this wisdom he has? What deeds of power are done by his hands!*" The hometown crowd was in awe.

And then something happened between verses two and three. Something went wrong between verses two and three. And Mark doesn't say what. But you can just feel the temperature going from red hot to frozen. If you read Luke's version of this, he gives a little more details about the things Jesus said, and the fact that they all tried to throw him off a cliff at the end of it.

But in Mark there aren't many details. The change is sudden, and it takes you by surprise. It goes from, "*What deeds of power are being done by his hands!*" to, "Hey! Wait a minute. A year ago, weren't you over working at Joe's wood shop?"

And then it's, "*Aren't you 'Mary's boy'?*" In a world where you're known by who your daddy is, to be called "Mary's boy" is not a theological statement of the incarnation. It's a question about Mary's morality and Jesus' parentage. "*Isn't he Mary's boy?* Wink. Wink. And then it's, "*We know you, we know your family, and you're nothing special.*" They thought it was about strength. They thought it was about deeds of power and miracles. They thought they understood all about Jesus.

But it's not about strength. It's not about power and miracles. It's about the radical love and mercy of our God. It's about how carpenters and healers *and* lawyers and Pharisees *and* homeless people and sinners are all welcome and connected.

It's about no less than death to all that binds us and breaks us. It's no less than resurrection to a new way of being alive. Miracles and works of power are just byproducts of that. They are just a way of saying, "This is what God wants for you; wholeness and life and community." It's not about strength. It's about the radical love and mercy of God.

And that is all a gift. It's a grace-filled gift from God. Jesus came preaching and demonstrating the grace and gifts of God. But you know something about gifts? Sometimes they're not accepted. Sometimes they're not wanted. When Jesus tried to give the gift of God's love and mercy to his own people, they laughed at him. They thought he was small. They thought he should be all about strength and power; and when he wasn't, they wanted nothing to do with him.

And what of us? Can we receive the gifts Jesus gives? Can we live in radical love and mercy? Can we hear that we are enough, that we don't have to prove our strength and abilities and power, that we can give our failures and stress to Jesus, because, you know what? Jesus has been there. Maybe, if we do that, we won't feel so much alone. Can we let ourselves be loved? Can we receive the free gifts that Jesus gives?

Jesus couldn't do much at Nazareth, so he leaves. But notice something. Jesus doesn't turn around and bad-talk on these villagers. He doesn't bash them. He doesn't curse them or condemn them or rain fire down on them. He is surprised by them. I suspect he's a little bit disappointed in them. But he does nothing. Now, if it had been me, there would have been lightning bolts involved; maybe some ninja angels. But Jesus just moves on. "*He went among the villages teaching,*" Mark said, and showing that love and that mercy and that forgiveness, freely as a gift, in other places.

And then he sends the disciples out to do the same thing. You know, it's not rocket science they were doing. You just need to know what it's like to be loved and supported. You need to know what it's like when that tightness in your chest and that fearful, closed-in feeling loosens up a little bit by some connection and some forgiveness. You just need to experience what trusting in God's faithfulness can do – the hope and the power and the renewal it can bring. If you've been touched by God, you're ready to go out and give the gift. If you've received the gift, you can give it.

But here's the hard part. Jesus told them, "*Take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; to wear sandals and not put on two tunics.*" You know, we hear that and we think, "I cannot possibly go on a trip without a toothbrush and an extra pair of underwear." Right? But I don't think all of this is about packing tips. I think it's about being enough just as you are. It's about opening yourselves up to what others are offering you, to share who you are. It's about trusting in the love of God.

So when you go – and notice I don't say "if" – when you go out to reach out with love to others, don't worry about not knowing enough, or not preparing enough. You are enough. Take all of your life: your accomplishments, your failures, your hopes, your losses, you're not being good enough on the fencing team unit, and you're not being good enough anywhere else. Just go to be with people, in honesty. Offer your real self. Love as you've been loved. You'll figure it out.

And when you reach out to others, open yourself to what they can give. Their stories are as powerful as yours. Don't write them off or think you know more. Learn from them. Be humbled by them. Weep with them. Offer a wholeness that you can only have together.

And, most of all, when you reach out in grace, trust the love of God. Forever and always, you are loved. If you raise the dead, or if you are laughed out of town, nothing will ever come between you and the God who loves you, the God who died for you, and rose so you might have life.

It's not about strength. It's never been about strength.

Amen.