

Answering the Call

Mark 6:7-13

July 16, 2006

I.

Today's gospel reading picks up where last week's ended. Last week we recall that Jesus was being given a hard time by people in his own home town. They knew of his humble origins, treated him as a carpenter's son, and rejected his teachings.

This week we see that none of this bothered Jesus at all. He just kept right on going, and sent his disciples out to do exactly what he had been doing.

It was as though he was saying "so, you don't like what I have been saying and doing. Well, here are twelve more who are going to do the same thing."

This was a significant development in Jesus' ministry in two ways. First, for the twelve, it was the beginning of their transformation from disciples into apostles. Perhaps it was like graduating from seminary and going to work in a real church. They no longer were learning at the feet of the Master. They were called, and empowered, to put their experience into practice.

And second, as we shall see from readings in the coming weeks, this was the beginning of their own ministry that later was carried on so dramatically and effectively after they were touched by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This mission of the twelve to go out and begin establishing communities of faith was the first step in establishing the mission of Christ's church that has continued to the present day.

II.

As we look more closely at this gospel reading, and as we try to understand what it means for us today, it is important to make some distinctions concerning how it fits into the larger picture.

First, while many parts of Scripture are models for how we treat each other within the church, and they tell us that we are to build each other up and support each other inside the church, that is not today's reading. Today, we are called to look outside the church. We are called to consider how we extend the church into the community. We are asked to think about how we, like the disciples, can take Jesus' message to others whose lives have not yet been changed. This is a sermon on mission and outreach. Sermons on fellowship and discipleship come later.

And second, while many parts of Scripture provide the assurance of salvation that comes from our acceptance of Christ's sacrifice, that also is not today's reading. Today's reading does not deal with the next life; rather it is concerned with this one. This is a sermon on our Christian responsibility now. Sermons on Christian hope and God's grace also will come later.

This is an important distinction. Some churches focus entirely on the afterlife. John 3:16 is quoted every Sunday. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life." That is a wonderful promise. It's the basis of our belief and the essential foundation of our faith. And it's clearly proclaimed in today's reading from Ephesians.

But that promise of eternal life doesn't kick in until we check out. What do we do in the meantime? Where do we look to find God now? How do we know what God wants us to do now? Although we know we are saved later, we still are called to seriously consider teachings like the reading we just heard this morning.

Now, before someone thinks I am some sort of heretic, let me make clear that I certainly recognize the importance of cross in our lives now. The forgiveness of our sins that comes from repentance, and that is inherent in the Eucharist, is essential to the Christian life. God's grace in sending his Son is evident every day.

My point is that even though we have salvation in the next life and we cannot lose that, there is more to it. We still are called to do God's work in the church and community in this life, and it is a call that we must answer.

That's what the gospel reading tells us, and I think we all realize that. We know that the true Christian life necessarily involves ministry and service. Your work on behalf of hurricane victims, for example, is a clear example of ministry and service. And your care and concern for each other is another.

The basic question relates to how we go about it consistently throughout our lives. How do we take these biblical stories that are two thousand years old and make them real today? Let me go into a little more detail.

III.

Mark's gospel leads us to think of two things. The first is an understanding of how we, as a community of faith, respond to our call to serve. The second is the matter of how each of us, in our own ways and in our own situations, can be faithful to that call.

Let's begin at the beginning. Jesus sent the disciples out as a group, just as we go into the world representing the church. The importance of their role to function collectively should not be underestimated. And he told them to go out into an uncertain future without any food, money, or extra clothes.

Think about this for a minute. Would we get on a plane with no luggage, no carry-on baggage, no reservations at the other end, and no money or credit cards? I don't think I could go anywhere without my briefcase. I know my wife would want at least one extra pair of shoes.

Mark does not go into detail, but I would speculate that one or more of those disciples might have thought: "Say what?" "Are you kidding?" Does this instruction remind us of those cans of concentrated frozen orange juice, where you have to add three cans of water before you can even drink it? Do we have to water this idea down before we can even get it into our systems?

I don't think so. Jesus was sending them out as an example of what could be accomplished without any extra help from material things. He wanted it to be clear that their work was not done in their own strength, but collectively through divine authority. He wanted people to realize that God was providing for the disciples just as God would provide for people who accepted their message and joined that early messianic community.

Perhaps the contemporary significance of Jesus' instruction to the disciples is not that we should leave everything at home, but rather that we should rid ourselves of excess baggage. As we prepare for ministry we don't have to spend a lot of time or energy worrying about material things when God will provide for us as we do his work.

Our churches don't require complex bureaucracies or corporate management systems in order to carry out our mission. And we don't want to focus only on programs for ourselves when other people also are in need. Clearly it's necessary to pay attention to what we do inside the church. But we cannot do so at the expense of what we are called to do outside the church.

Our ministry outside the church can take many forms. In the Gulf Coast it certainly is a ministry that recognizes the aftermath of Katrina. But it also is a ministry to the sick, the

poor, the oppressed, and those existing at the margins of society who were here before Katrina and who Jesus says always will be with us. And it is a ministry to our next door neighbors, our colleagues in the workplace, and our friends and their friends, wherever we might gather.

There is much to be done. As we plan for the future role that St. Thomas will take in a community that has been forever changed, I urge all of us to pray and search our hearts and listen for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we each ask how we can continue the work that twelve disciples began so long ago.

And if we pray for guidance, I am convinced that it will come. Scripture shows us that God chooses ordinary people to do extraordinary things. In the Old Testament reading we saw that Amos was a simple dresser of sycamore trees, and yet he was called to confront the high priest and prophesy the death of the king. The disciples were fishermen and laborers and common men who did uncommon things. Paul was a tentmaker who contributed more pages to the Bible than anyone.

Now, I don't expect that we will be remembered as Amos, Paul and the disciples, but we are just as much a part of God's plan for humanity. We each bring our own special skills, and resources, and talents to the table. We all are not the same, and we all have different ways in which we can help. Just as there are varieties of spiritual gifts, so also there are varieties of opportunities to contribute as we try to be faithful to our call to serve.

Not everyone should be a missionary in a foreign country, just as an example, although it is a high calling for those who do it. Not everyone can work in homeless shelters, or nursing homes, or prisons, although those who do that work often will find that the Holy Spirit is in the room. Not everyone wants be part of a food pantry or a thrift shop, but those who do so can brighten people's lives. Many people are most effective at working in the church to support others, or planning and organizing while others are implementing those plans.

In the end, however, the Holy Spirit will lead us if we prayerfully seek the Spirit's guidance. And if the Holy Spirit goes before us then we know that we truly will be doing God's work.

IV.

And as we think about our work in the community, I want to put before you a question. Suppose, today, that Jesus returned to earth *incognito* to get a first hand look at things before he really returns.

Now, I realize that Scripture doesn't say anything about Jesus coming back for a sneak preview, and that Scripture says when he comes again it will be in glory to establish God's kingdom.

But let's just assume that he comes anyway, like I said. Where do you think we would find him? On the golf course? Driving a BMW? Sitting in a corporate board meeting? No, not likely. And I'm not being critical here. People who play golf and drive BMWs love Jesus and are faithful people just as much as anyone else. Prosperity in and of itself does not prevent people from being good Christians.

But if we really wanted to find Jesus, he would be where he always was. We would have to look for him today in the same places where people would have looked two thousand years ago. We would find him with the poor, with the needy, with those rejected by society, and with those whose hope is a distant memory.

He would be with those who lost everything last August, and who do not even have the basics of what the rest of us have. He would be sitting in the shelters with men aged beyond their years. He would be walking with disillusioned women pushing their old grocery carts to

nowhere in particular. He would be with those struggling with addictions, and illness, and other burdens that prevail in this broken world.

We don't see many of these images in our community, but they are not far away. If Jesus were here he would be with them and would be calling us join him in extending ourselves to them.

But, this is all a hypothetical. Jesus is not going to come back for a sneak preview. And God is not just going to wave his hand and make these problems go away. So it is up to us. Just as Jesus commissioned the disciples then, he has commissioned us now, as the church, to do the work. We are called to do what he would do if he were here.

V.

Sometimes it's appropriate to end a sermon with a prayer. This especially is the case when we consider a call to mission that clearly is present, but we have been moving into an new period that still is defining itself and the way in which we respond is yet to be decided. Over the coming months I am confident that, with all of us working together, St. Thomas can continue its contribution to the community and be faithful to Jesus' call to mission; a call first heard by the disciples but a call that continues until his coming again. Let us pray.

Almighty and everliving God, source of all wisdom and understanding, be present with us as we work to care for and guide this church community. We pray that through your Holy Spirit you will lead us to right actions and wise decisions for the welfare and faith of this parish and of Christ's Church. Teach us in all things to seek first your honor and glory. Help us to remember that your power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Guide us to know your will for us, and grant us both the courage to pursue it and the grace to accomplish it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*