



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 7 – Proper 9 Year B

Hometown

[RCL]: 2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

Several years ago, a diocese was celebrating its one-hundredth anniversary. At the time, the diocese had produced a beautiful coffee table book that contained short histories of each of their parishes, along with a generous helping of pictures. At the diocesan convention that year, the book was being sold everywhere and anywhere, between legislative sessions, in the exhibition hall, you name it. There had even been a table set up in the narthex of the church where the convention Eucharist was being held. The book was being sold to folks as they walked in.

When the diocese's retired bishop took to the pulpit for the sermon, he began with saying, "I'm sorry if you heard the commotion a few moments ago, there was a homeless, long-haired man that got into the church. He was shouting something about his father's house and he turned over the tables where we are selling our book. Don't worry, we got rid of him."

Don't worry, we got rid of him. Of course, he was kidding, there was no commotion, no long-haired, homeless man. But the bishop also wasn't really kidding. He was leveling a clear criticism using the story of the clearing of the Temple to critique the diocese's overzealousness in selling the book. The bishop was afraid that the zeal for the book was getting more energy than the mission of the church.

Don't worry, we got rid of him.

Where is Jesus to be found? Where do we encounter the Holy? Is it at church? Is it only at church? Can Jesus be found at church, or do we get rid of him?

Let's dive into the gospel story to see if there are any hints as to where Jesus can most reliably be found. The story opens in his hometown, and his disciples follow him. It's an interesting detail. Jesus is from Nazareth and his disciples are from Galilee. They have walked with him back home. It is an interesting and significant detail; Jesus is returning home, but he's different in several ways now, not the least of which is that he has followers.

The ones in the synagogue who hear Jesus preaching are astounded. They are into it. They are in awe. Then the analysis comes on: “Don’t we know this guy; didn’t he install your cabinets?” “That’s right! I know his brothers and sisters, I just saw them at the falafel stand on Wednesday.” Something like that.

After all this wondering and recognition, the next sentence the gospel uses is: “And they took offense at him.” Why do you suppose that was? They were astounded, but when they saw that he was “one of them,” all of a sudden, he is offensive. Jesus then demonstrates a masterful use of the double negative, “Prophets are not without dishonor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And the narrator tells us that Jesus couldn’t do any deeds of power except a few healings. Indeed, Jesus is amazed at their unbelief and it seems that there is some connection between trusting Jesus and Jesus being able to work. This matter of Jesus not being able to work is not the same as praying harder, by the way, but there is a connection between Jesus working and the offense the people feel at his presence and teaching.

Jesus and his followers then leave Nazareth. They leave Jesus’ hometown and enter the villages that presumably surrounded the big city. And then something interesting happens. You would think that given the cold reception Jesus received in his hometown that Jesus would then give them the old razzle-dazzle, he would heal and work miracles. Instead, Jesus heals and then pairs off his followers and sends them out with special instructions. They are to travel light. They do, they preach repentance, they heal, and they call out evil when encountered.

Jesus doesn’t give them the razzle-dazzle, he doesn’t do a deed of power to embarrass the old home locals; he instead authorizes others to go out in his name to heal, testify to God’s love, to call out evil. This is very instructive about how our God operates generally. Never a braggadocious moment, never a moment of old-fashioned power like lightning from above—instead, it’s a new-fashioned power that points away from itself and pours into others.

This is how God operates, and it is something for us to remember as we move through this season after Pentecost: the Holy Spirit is God’s sharing of God’s-self with us: God’s empowering of us for the work of establishing God’s Kingdom, God’s way of living, right here in our own communities.

Besides all this, we see something in the story that is as troubling as it is interesting. Jesus is unrecognized in his hometown. He is recognized of course, but he is not accepted as one who is deeply connected with God. Indeed, once they do begin to recognize him, they are offended by him. And it’s in this offense and un-trust, this unbelief, that Jesus cannot work as powerfully as he would have normally.

This should concern all of us who claim to know who and what Jesus is. The church is the hometown of Jesus, as it were. Are we offended by him? Do we allow Jesus to be Jesus or have we domesticated him into a mere kindly carpenter? The church has, at times, carefully kept Jesus in a safe and contained box, but Jesus keeps leaving the familiar, keeps empowering others, and most importantly keeps showing up in strange places that are not his hometown.

That's where we will most reliably find Jesus, outside of the hometown. Of course, we meet in this space each week. We come for solace and strength. We certainly believe that Jesus is present with us, especially in the Holy Eucharist; but Jesus is also found outside, in the villages, in the world. Don't you know that we disciples are always playing catch-up to the Risen Lord? Ever since that day when the women found an empty tomb, ever since then, we have been going to where Jesus has gone ahead of us, into Galilee, into the villages, into our neighborhoods. And once we go there, seeking him in the face our neighbors, he will be revealed, and we just might be empowered to do his work: healing wounds, preaching God's love, and calling out evil.

Let us go from here, into the villages following Jesus where he has already gone—and not simply following him, but being empowered by him to do his work of love and healing which the world so desperately needs.

Amen.

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