

8 July 2018
Whitsuntide VII
St Mark 6: 1 - 13

Very often when we consider this passage, and the ones in the other Gospels which are very similar to it, we think of it in terms of faith or lack of faith. In many ways, that is an accurate interpretation and certainly appropriate. We see countless examples of Jesus travelling all across Israel and people coming up to him asking to be healed, or asking on behalf of a friend or loved one. Time and again, Jesus tells them; your faith has made you well. Sometimes it was the implied question of 'are you willing to experience this?' Sometimes it is a direction question - do you want to be healed? And so, the emphasis is on not just the divine power of Jesus, but on the faith of the individual or someone very close to them. Our faith in the divine power and grace of Jesus work in tandem.

Our Lord returns to his own home town, and he wants to offer this same compassion and care to the people he knew. At first they were happy to see him again, but then they started doubting that he was really all he was claiming to be. They had no faith, and as a result nothing good happened. They didn't believe it could happen, and quite simply it didn't.

For centuries clergy and Sunday school teachers, parents, and adults have all joined together in admonishing children and one another not to be slackers on this matter of faith. If you do not have absolute faith, then Jesus won't answer your prayers. Sometimes, that just isn't helpful. Nor are some of the more secular self-help books that teach the power of positive thinking, how to think and grow rich, and so on.

Let's move to a slightly different perspective that is away from faith and healing, from belief and receiving good things.

Instead, let's look at this in terms of building community. Traditionally, we often thought of community as our neighbourhood. Growing up, my hometown of Rochester, Minnesota had a population of around 30,000, but it was clearly divided into three distinct neighbourhoods. The south eastern quarter was decidedly working class; southwest was the area where physicians at the Mayo Clinic made their homes. And the north east and west was made up of new-comers, many of them who were employed at the huge IBM plant. Each neighbourhood was its own community with its own ethos and traditions.

For many decades, that is how we thought of community. But today, we look at much smaller communities of common interests or special interests, rather than geographical boundaries. For example, here in our area we have the business community, environmental community, the art community, and so on. Even though we are only a mile away, we have the sometimes very separate communities of Saugatuck, Douglas, and the township.

Even in All Saints, we have a community at 8 AM and another one at 10. We have groups - communities - that are interested in social justice, in mission outreach, in parish life.

The list goes on, but you get the basic idea. And, this can be a very good thing when we find a place where we fit in, where we are accepted, and speak the same language. We know that they are speaking English, but the words are a mystery. It can also be very lonely and isolating when we realize we don't fit in.

It is hideous and wicked when communities succumb to the temptation of tribalism, where they compete and sometimes fight against one another. It becomes horrible when communities are divisive with each other, or try to gain supremacy and somehow bring down or defeat others.

That is what we see happening in our gospel lesson.

In the first part of this morning's passage, Jesus is returning to his home town. We don't know how long he had been gone - perhaps a few weeks, perhaps months, perhaps longer. It doesn't matter. He was coming home again and he wanted to connect with the people he knew.

This is what happens here so much of the time that we don't even think about it. An individual goes on a holiday for a week or two, and when they come back they are eager to see us, and we them. We want to hear all that is happening in their life. Maybe they go away for the winter, and the moment they return to All Saints' it almost seems as if the day is warmer and brighter. Or, some of you will be attending a high school or college class reunion, and perhaps see people you haven't seen for decades.

That's another type of community. I think that connection is what Jesus was hoping to experience when he returned home and brought his friends with him. From his words, it is clear that the event was very disappointing, almost heart-breaking.

We come to the second part where he sent out his twelve disciples in six groups of two to go into the nearby villages. He tells them to travel light. Keep the baggage to a minimum. Some people take every possible thing that might possibly need, and in multiples. You've seen them in airports with multiple massive suitcases. Others can travel across the world for weeks with just a carry-on bag. I understand it is a risky feeling to that, but it truly does work. And, it proves to be a lot less work than having to pull heavy bags through airports, fit them into taxis and take care of all that inventory. Travelling light means we are less concerned about looking after our possessions, and have more time to look at the new place and the people we are visiting.

This idea of travelling light extends well beyond going from one location to another. It applies to much of life, because we sometimes discover that an abundance of possessions take an abundance of time, of our life. We are too busy taking care of the inventory that we are stopped from experiencing other good things - and people.

Even though we often focus on miracles and healings, perhaps an even greater miracle and the healing of hearts is our Lord's emphasis on building and creating and maintaining communities. It's a constant theme throughout the gospels - inviting the twelve to join him on an adventure, eating with all sorts of interesting people, conversations, religious debates. Jesus is demonstrating the possibilities for a very full and exciting life, and almost always it is with other people. That's community and make no mistake about it, community occurs when we accept and embrace God's transcending love as experienced through Jesus Christ.

That is what he is showing us. And we can expand our thinking about the word community because sometimes they occur very briefly, yet have a long-lasting influence on our life. At the very least they create wonderful memories for the future.

For you and me, building community must always begun with our baptismal covenant. It is the one thing - the promises and vows we make at baptism, and which we re-affirm each time we celebrate that Sacrament here at All Saints - which bind us together and to Jesus. It is all inclusive. Period.

Building community is, I believe, the truth mission outreach work of today. I saw that because so many of our electronic communication devices give us instant connection, but we need human to human connection, and connection with the immediate world around us. Isolation and loneliness is the most serious epidemic in this country. People are lonely, not merely alone, but lonely, and it is deadly. We've moved from the old ways of easy connection - the front porch, participating in fraternal and civic organizations and churches, and writing letters. We have become wary of strangers and people we don't know. We're hesitant to start a conversation with someone we don't know well because it doesn't quite seem safe. And, families, where several generations have lived relatively close to one another, are now spread across the country, if not the world.

This is our task - building communities.

It begins by each of us embracing our Lord's perfect love that leaves no space left for fear and anxiety of other people or groups that hold different views. It continues when we live in that transcendent love and invite others to be part of it.

It is always going to be an on-going task because the dynamics are always changing.