

"The Honor of Dusty Feet"

July 4, 2021

Sermon by Dawn Jefferson at TriCon Church on Zoom

Mark 6:1-13

I want to wish you all a happy summer. And as much as I have been enjoying some moments of the heat, by a beach or swimming pool and as much as we should be taking time to relax and enjoy our loved ones, the scriptures still speak about what our callings are as followers of a man from Nazareth, the God who made him and the Spirit that resides with us even now. On the heels of last week's mission trip, and truly in contemplating the meaningfulness of today's holiday, "America's Independence Day," I am led this morning to preach about rejected prophets, ungrateful neighbors, and callings to discipleship. While we may be on vacation and resting from the drive to our summer cabin, there is still a Word from the Lord.

Will you pray with me? God help us to perceive all that you have already revealed about who you are to us and what and whom we are called to. Remind us in our celebrations that freedom isn't free and that everyone isn't free yet. Help us to understand how Jesus was a prophet and what prophets are assigned to accomplish. Embolden us to move beyond the permission, acceptance, and affirmations we thought we needed from other people, and to trust in the authority you alone have given us. Show us how to go about and teach and live your gospel, in Christ's name we pray, Amen.

I always want to reflect on what Independence Day can and does mean. I chose this text today to think about a few things. There are three elements of this text that allow us to meditate and reflect on where freedom comes from and how it is dispersed. There are three constituents of today's text that I want us to look at. First, is Jesus, the prophet, the 2nd are his dismissive neighbors, and 3rd are the disciples with dusty feet.

We speak a great deal about Christ, and God's son, and I want to draw our attention to Jesus, citizen, son, brother, budding rabbi, and prophet. Many people call Jesus different things, but in this particular chapter and verse, he is a prophet. He calls himself such and in a very different light draws attention to his personal experience in Nazareth.

I want to discuss first what a prophet is. Especially in light of this text and how Jesus' commentary here explains prophets. First, the context of these scriptures in Mark follows several significant miracles and exchanges with Jesus. In Chapter 5, Jesus delivers the man called Legions from the demons that had controlled his life and then Jesus raises Jairus' daughter from the dead. These are not small feats, they speak to several things. They speak to healing and restoration. They highlight the specific lives of people who are not usually valued - an unhoused man tortured my mental illness

and a sick little girl. On a societal level it is important that the people that Jesus gives his attention to here and in previous moments are the otherwise discarded and rejected members of their community. But beyond that, beyond helping marginalized people regain a sense of humanity and dignity not to mention the restoration of their very lives, just look at what Jesus did. There were miracles. There were things that most human beings could not do on their own. These actions are divinely inspired. And it is here where even Jesus is helping us to understand what a prophet is and does.

Based on Jesus’ actions alone in Mark 5, a prophet is **someone in solidarity with marginalized people and moved by compassion to act on their behalf.**

A prophet is not a magician and is not a teller of the future. In the Christian context, the prophet is not always even an activist who works overtly against political systems. But what a prophet does do is **criticize**. Walter Brueggemann, renowned Old Testament scholar and theologian, writes in his book *Prophetic Imagination*, that “compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.” He says that Jesus’ compassion is an “act of public criticism in which he dares to act upon his concern against the entire numbness of his social context.” Prophets resist business as usual. Not by storming buildings, but by systematically interrupting numbness and enacting compassion. A prophet judges the dominant consciousness by showing compassion instead. Often times, prophets stand out. They are different. But more than just being weird, prophets are moved by compassion. And in this way, they are countercultural to empire.

Empires are not built on compassion. In fact, they are built and operate on numbness. Empires do not stop dealing in power and privilege, abuse, and oppression just because someone is in pain. But there must be someone out there, someone who does not walk passed a blind man, a woman with an issue of blood, a screaming young man running through a cemetery. Someone does not go along with empire, and in the midst of poverty, someone stops. Someone becomes proximate to pain. Someone asks questions, and someone acts. Their action is a criticism of what has become normative.

And while I know we are celebrating the historical liberation of our nation from the British empire, I ask myself, is our country free of similar comparisons. Is our present country possibly guilty of performing as the very kind of empirical system that it prides itself from being independent from? Is America numb to people’s needs or is this a country attends to its cries for help?

Because of what Jesus says in Mark 6, I ask this question because I wonder so often how complicit am I with Empire with a capital E? No, not just capitalism and wealth, not just power and privilege, but the system that overlooks people in pain. That marvels at how

racism can be real, that is confused about how to feed people and decides that people should have to earn their way to health.

I watch a movie like *Star Wars*, and fancy myself a Jedi although I don't see myself with a physical light saber. I can't pilot a plane and I don't really subscribe to the actualities of warfare. I'm not that kind of soldier. But I love George Lucas' epic tale because it inspires me that there are always people willing to resist empirical forces. To stand up to the Darth Vaders and Death Stars, and to give a ride to someone who needs as much help as you. No matter how death dealing, destructive and consuming the dominant culture, there are those who are inspired to go out two by two and find the overlooked and oppressed people.

So, I say all that to say that Jesus was a prophet. Jesus strategically resisted empirical forces by living compassionately and healing people who were consistently overlooked. And that is the beginning of our text today. This Jesus prophet who has healed and helped dozens of people in public now returns to his own neighborhood among the women and men, elders and families with whom he grew up. These folk knew his father Joseph, are acquainted with his mother Mary and know all of Jesus' siblings.

So, the 2nd constituency is **the neighborhood**, the community. Well, usually, I love the concept of community. I have fond thoughts of my neighborhood growing up and love the neighbors we have in Alexandria. I think often of the body of Christ as a kind of neighborhood or as Dr. King might refer to us as the Beloved Community. But Jesus, as sub-author of this scripture focuses specifically on his own community and how it falls short.

The people of Nazareth; they are human. They make some mistakes. But I think, as inspired by the prophetic this morning, I want to critique some things about these particular neighborhood people. First, *they don't trust the evidence*. The list of miracles and gaggle of people whose lives were transformed by Jesus were not enough evidence for their faith. They either needed to see more, understand it more, or wanted more information on how Jesus all of a sudden has this power. The miraculous is not amazing enough for them. Wow! Have you ever come across these kinds of folk? -- Great news, wonderful testimonies, positive changes, but they don't really see it, they're going to wait a little longer. They need still yet more proof. Ye of little faith.

Also, these neighbors *make subtle sociological judgments*. Oh yes, they are not quite persuaded that Jesus, Mary's son, who is merely a carpenter with a now single mother, who never went to college or rabbinical school. He doesn't have formal training, he's not a doctor, surely, this Jesus couldn't be out here doing miracles? Let me see his credentials? From where did he graduate? Where is he working now? He didn't even do an internship? Isn't he still living at home...Hmmm. Not convinced.

These neighbors *underestimate home-grown talent*. One of the true sadnesses of faith is not just when we don't believe God can do something. That's bad enough within itself. It's when we don't believe that God can show up in someone else. In Anyone else, really. The question of how the carpenter's son could accumulate such wisdom or perform wondrous acts is actually really logical. You grew up watching your neighbor's kids. You know your cousins. Aren't you sure and **totally certain** that you also understand their limitations? What skills sets they couldn't possibly acquire? But it's living with such logic, such facts, that limits these neighbor's own revelation and well-being. Verse 5 says that Jesus could do no mighty work there because of their own unbelief.

I am taking my time here, because the kind of criticism of the neighbors is not the same kind of criticism that the prophet has. In many ways, the neighbors of Nazareth are dangerous because their criticism kills hope and they destroy life with the power of their words. I have seen it. I have worked with and taught beautiful, creative teenagers who are surrounded by voices who will not give them grace, who do not let them make mistakes, who question them at every turn and consistently speak negativity into their futures. And verse 3, where it says, “they took offense at him;” it literally means “to see in another what I disapprove of and that hinders me from acknowledging their authority.” I almost discount their humanity because I refuse to see them, their gifts, their possibility. Whew, this is a dangerous neighborhood.

What I've seen and experienced of your church is some wonderful families and gracious people... But JUST in case you belong to a less than perfect household. Just in case you are in a less than joyful marriage or you and your children and parents experience some relationship struggles, I just want to remind you that Jesus gets it. He knows what it is like to be working diligently to love people and still be surrounded by criticism and rejection. In Verse 6 - Jesus himself marvels at the lack of faith his neighbors and home town put in him. AND he STILL goes among the village teaching. Both of these things are possible – rejection and perseverance.

And to any of you who have this compassionate prophetic spirit and calling. To any of you who can't help but share more specifically how and when God is at work in your life. And share about what makes God worthy enough to believe in. For those of you are already actively engaged in being proximate to those in pain and giving attention to the people the empire callously ignores. For any who feel deeply misunderstood...Remember that Jesus went on anyhow. And so should you.

Also, Jesus is so convicted, so purposed, that Jesus doesn't go it alone. *Jesus finds purpose in other people committed to the same compassion*. He is not accepted, respected or valued where he comes from, but he carries on anyhow. He doesn't cancel his operation or his ministry. Actually, he grows it. It is at this very moment that he

deputizes the disciples with the same power and authority to disrupt the empire that he’s demonstrated.

The third constituency in this scripture are **the disciples**. They are given specific instructions. I appreciate this text for that very reason. I grew up in a somewhat critical culture, there were so many expectations of righteousness. There were lists of what you shouldn’t do as a Christian if you were truly holy, and it was long list. But here, I truly love how simple Jesus’ instructions are for these disciples in this moment. He gathers them to him; he sends them out with purpose and gives them a buddy. But most beautifully, he stands there and says, “Look, remember what you just saw me doing for the last few weeks. Remember, the guy, and the woman, and the girl. Amazing, right? You have the authority to do the same. I’m giving you permission and the power and the authority to go visit new people and share the same miraculous healing with them. Go and change their lives forever. Now, don’t go expecting ANYTHING from them. Don’t expect food, clothing, or even payment. Go simply in sandals, a t-shirt and jeans. Be committed to where you go, stay with them until you finish. And, if and when you are rejected, dust off your shoes and leave.” The disciples were obedient. They went and did as they were told. And the evidence was change in the lives of people. The evidence was anointing and healing. The kind of healing that didn’t happen in Nazareth because they were too logical to receive a blessing from Jesus the way they could have.

I am convicted by this text for what it says about empire. For what it asks of me. I hear it asking me how complicit am I with Empire? How easily I critique the measures of hope and transformation possibilities for change that look different than what I’ve thought or seen, rather than critique the empire itself...I’m convicted by what else Christ could do in my life if I just believed and received all of him. I’m convicted by my feet when they are not dusty. And while I’m on vacation, I want to get my legs ready and my feet ready to go get dusty afterward.

Before you go back to your newspapers or for your walk on this day, I want you to pray for yourself and your family. I want you to reflect this week about which people in this story is most like You. Could it be that you are a prophet specifically called to exercise compassion in some extraordinary ways? Could it be that your love and giving have earned you a reputation like Jesus’ where people question you, your authenticity and even doubt your gifts? Could it be that the very people you live with do not understand the intensity of your relationship to God and the kind of love you show to others who are different from you?

Or could it be that you are a neighbor of Nazareth? Are you a naysayer or even worse, a quiet doubter who needs more evidence about what God can do? Perhaps you are one who is underestimating people in your life, your friends and relatives -- yourself. You don’t exhibit faith in what faithful people are capable of and you verbally share your

disapproval such that it hinders others from acknowledging the authority they have in their own lives. You criticize and require others to perform to the narrowness of your imagination. Are you one of those people who is seemingly close to Jesus, near the church community, but don't really believe in the power thereof?

Or hopefully, you are *or are getting ready to be* a member of the Dirty Sandals Club. You talk less about what you might do and you act on your faith. There is evidence of your relationship and proximity to those whom Empire can spare no compassion. We can see the dust in your sandals, and the callouses on your hands. There is evidence in your life that you have been called and sent out by Jesus himself. You are near people who need healing and you are practicing your authority in the Spirit through prayer, and faith, in relationship and conversation. You are not wishy-washy about God, you are not merely culturally Christian, but people have to take you or leave you. They recognize God's love in your inquiries: when you knock on their door, and when you enter their home. They feel you in their life story and are persuaded that they are loved by God through you. Perhaps you are a prophet in training who while you may not have honor in your own Nazareth, your dirty feet are all the honor you require.

Amen.

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