6th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.4.21

Mark 6:1-13
He left that place and 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 refuse 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. (290)

A few years ago, two movies about the Second World War came out, both of events that happened in 1940, *The Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk.* I happened to see them both.

The Darkest Hour focused on Winston Churchill's decision whether to negotiate with Hitler as Hitler rampaged across Europe or to go to war with him, though it might mean the downfall of the British Empire.

Dunkirk concerned an evacuation of British soldiers from a beach in Dunkirk, northern France, where they'd become stranded. Taking a more splayed look, the film tells the story from air, land, and sea, about how to get these hopeless cases back across the English Chanel. The finale of the film is the peoples' armada, pleasure boats, fishing boats, all deployed by regular old Britons to ferry this decimated battalion home, all while Nazi bombers bombed. Some Britons—soldiers, civilians—would make it home. Some wouldn't.

Full disclosure, I liked *Dunkirk* better. But the coincidence of the two movies presented, to me at least, an interesting consideration of how history is understood.

One, *The Darkest Hour,* considers history from a so-called "great man" perspective. Here it's suggested that history most often comes down to "great men," their decisions and actions. It's these that steer history's broad course, terrible, awesome. In positions of great power, they exercise

great power. Whether wisely or tragically, whether graciously or shamefully, this is for history then to decide.

The other, *Dunkirk,* tells history from the people's perspective. Here it's suggested that the events of history most often amount from ordinary people doing ordinary things and, every once in a while, extraordinary things. It's an accumulation of many moving parts, and seldom moving strategically or fully consciously. No one of us can see much beyond the close horizon of our individual lives and selves, to say nothing of then collaborating, or less so conspiring, to steer history on some predetermined course. Really, we just do we what we do, and we hope for the best, and history bumps along, more of a river than, say, a canal, cut with intention. No, this is all mostly happenstance.

It will drive you nuts. Word of warning: if you like the idea of control, this way of imagining history, to say nothing of this way of *experiencing* history: it will drive you nuts. It will take faith, I tell you, a lot of faith, if faith can be understood as coming in such measurements—a little, a lot.

How much do you have?

The moment we find ourselves in with Jesus according to Mark might be thought of in these terms, Jesus making the move from a great man experience to a people's venture.

It's been some time now that Jesus has operated on his own, especially according to Mark. Though almost always with his disciples, though also often with the gathered and now following crowd, Jesus is, especially according to Mark, remembered as being a singular figure in the world, alone in the world.

Here though, in this event about a third of the way into this gospel narrative, Jesus met with a perhaps startling limit to what he could do. The familiarity of those in his own hometown was a limit not only on their imaginations, but also on his subsequent effectiveness in making manifest the reign of God. Their inability to take him beyond how they'd already taken him—as his mother's son, his siblings' brother, their neighbor, their kid: now that he was coming at them in new form, with new capability: it was a lot to ask that they reimagine him, that they reconceive of him. It was a lot to ask. But lacking this reimagining, this reconceiving, he couldn't do the things he'd been reconceived to do: to make manifest the reign of God.

So long been Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, he couldn't now be the Christ, Christ for the world.

Mark's gospel doesn't have a clear beginning to Jesus' Christhood. The others do, the others of the four canonical gospel narratives. Matthew imagines his beginning, a dream visited

upon Joseph that the child his betrothed, Mary, was carrying was conceived of the Holy Spirit. Luke imagines his beginning, the angel Gabriel visited upon Mary to tell her the Holy Spirit would come upon her and so the child she would conceive would be holy, would be called the Son of God. John imagines still further back, to the beginning of all creation, the Christ a co-creator with God at the beginning, and yet creating with God throughout time, while also come into time as a man, as Jesus, sent to set about the works of God, working the creation toward completion, working the creation free of sin toward perfection. Mark, though, begins his gospel narrative with Jesus' baptism, an occurrence in his young adulthood.

What came prior to that is anyone's supposing.

It's possible Jesus was just as ordinary as those in his hometown according to Mark remembered him to be, someone's kid, someone's brother.

If so, this reconceiving: it would have been a lot to ask his neighbors, his longtime friends.

Also, if so, it would have made that conducive context we imagined last Sunday in short supply.

Last week we imagined the church as the sort of context that made even more possible that immediate presence of the reign of God. We imagined the church as the sort of people among whom Jesus was ever more potent as the manifest arrival of the kingdom of God. If it takes a people to make possible the presence of God and the works of love, then the church is to be that place, is to be that people, conducive of the works of love.

I'd wager the world needs such a people conducive of the works of love. Apparently, Jesus needed it as well.

Last week we met with two groups. One greatly expected of Jesus—and then received of what they greatly expected. The other expected little of Jesus—and then got put outside the house where inside Jesus would then make manifest the powerful, astonishing will of God. See, the believing of the people made the miraculous real, while the unbelieving of the other people made those people as but in the way, stumbling blocks to the otherwise made-straight arrival. These, then, needed to be set outside so to clear a place for the arrival of grace.

Here again, now in Nazareth, we see the effect a people's disposition can have even on the persistent will of God and his powerful works of love.

But rather than set the whole village of people "outside," Jesus would here make broader how these works would be realized.

The apostles. Those who would be sent out in his name, now they would indeed be sent out in his name, empowered by the same authorizing Spirit as bestowed upon Jesus such astonishing authority. If Jesus would indeed meet with limitations as to where he could effectively work, and as to how long amidst the world he would live so to work, then he would need to broaden his effect, to widen his reach, stretch it across the region, stretch it across time. These limitations on his so-called greatness would make it so others need also be set to great works.

The apostles, those who would be sent out in his name, *a-post*, "sent out."

They were to keep it simple, just as Jesus had kept it simple. They must dress simply. They must carry nothing in excess that they might depend upon the kindness of strangers, make themselves vulnerable to a world of strangers. And they were to accept the hospitality of those who showed them hospitality, all of which is itself something of a lost art among the likes of us at least.

This is a favorite point of one scripture scholar whose lectionary podcast I listen to—that hospitality isn't always a matter of having people in to join you as you are, that it's sometimes a matter of setting out and entering into how someone else is.

Which isn't always so easy to do. It's not always so easy to join in someone else's way, especially not for the likes of us, in such a culture as ours. We tend to be pretty sure that our way is the right way, that our way is the *best* way. Judging from much of our rhetoric, we tend to consider ourselves the envy of the world.

But is this so? And why must it be so, why do we need that to be so?

This might also be true on a more personal level—that we configure our households not simply as if "this is my way" but as if "this is the right way."

When it comes to apostleship, though, this won't do. An apostle must be as gracious to join in the ways of the host as to join in the ways of the *Host*. Indeed, being a grateful guest might be a most manifest way to be an apostle of Jesus who is become the Host of the world, the Host at the Lord's table in glory.

What sort of guests, then, shall we be? What sort of guest do you tend to be?

Sending these people out: Jesus was letting go a lot of control. Sending *these* people out: Jesus was allowing that things might get even more complicated, even more dependent on God's mysterious grace to work the miraculous.

Control: sometimes power needs us to let go control in order for that power to manifest. Indeed, true power needs us to let go control. We tend to conflate these things, power and

control. We tend to think they're one and the same, or at least closely related. As often as that, though, they can work as opposites.

And they might get it wrong—these apostles sent out in Jesus' name. They might get it wrong. Indeed, they likely would get it wrong, at least some of the time—which might have made Jesus nuts to imagine it, to throw the steering of this to people, these plain old people though now made apostles, sent out, sent out. By grace? By the Holy Spirit? You can only hope.

I played with the text of *America the Beautiful* this week, as evidenced in what we just sang. I played with it because I wanted us to sing it, but a lot of its text just doesn't sing true anymore. To be certain, it tells a good story. It just doesn't tell a true story, not anymore. We know too much now to go back to believing all that.

And it's always a tricky thing, considering what text we might together sing. Hence all the conflict around hymnals. It's still tricker a thing, striking upon the right Prayer of Invocation. Whether I find it or I write it, it's always a tricky thing, striking upon words to have someone else say, words to have *you* say. These words, after all, should bring us to the outer edge of what we might ever say. They should bring us to the outer edge of what we already know and comfortably believe, comfortably confess, bring us a bit beyond that, to something we didn't know we knew or had never quite considered that way. But they shouldn't have us say something we'd never otherwise consent to say. That's coercion, not liturgy.

All of this is to mean, they should be true—and truth is always a tricky thing.

It's all the trickier when what are together to say is something about our country, on this Independence Day, something about its origin, its self-conception, and in the context of church, of worship, which would demand something more honest of us than pablum or polite propaganda. A lot of American ideals can be configured theologically—liberty, the dignity of the individual person, the coupling of rights and responsibilities which do indeed have an antecedent in the Ten Commandments. But a lot can't, like independence, which is itself a godless ideal, especially when it comes to Yahweh, the God of the Bible, who would have us understand ourselves as utterly dependent, not self-made by God-made in the context of community, and not so cut clean of entanglements as not to be mired in sin.

Playing with the text of *America the Beautiful*, I struggled to find a way in the text for repentance, this thing which is essential to the ministry of Jesus, this thing which is essential to what the apostles were sent out to do and is essential in the life of any Christian, even the American Christian, and perhaps especially the American Christian on Independence Day.

Repentance: I've said it a million times. It's not merely an admission of guilt, a confession of sin. It's also, it's more so, a return to the Lord who is our origin and our end. the Hebrew original meaning "return." Add to that the concept of an expansion of mind, the Greek rendering meaning a grand sort of knowledge, a knowledge that reaches behind and beyond, before and above, the sort of knowledge that approaches the mind of God, which is to know God and to know as God knows.

Part of that knowledge, part of that return, is indeed an admission of guilt, a confession of sin, a recognition that our existence is far more complicated than the beautiful, the spacious, the spreading of a people all about freedom and abundance from sea to shining sea. It's also about conquest and exploitation, about the violence that all nations do, not least our nation, but ours a sort of mindless violence, self-denying violence.

And yet.

And yet.

Langston Hughes told a story of America too. In his poem, "Let America Be America Again," this writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Black, prolific, bold in his hope, we meet a busy, crowded, complicated America that's worthy of his insistence, worthy even of his rough devotion. Truly, he understood America as always yet to be, always and only yet to be, a thing that aspires to be and that should therefore inspire Americans more boldly to become.

It's striking to the ear, don't you think? How the political catchphrase of the last five years finds an echo in in this poem's title, though also a contrast: "Make America great again." To make America great again would suggest it once was great and our project should be to get back to that prior greatness. To let America be America again is to imply something of crucial difference. It's first to require not force, a making, but a letting go of force, a letting, an allowing. It's then to suggest that America is in essence the thing it aims to be. So, to let America be America again is to let the aspiration essential to its being, to let that aim be our prime mover once again. It's a return to a way that aims rather than reacts, that aspires, that aspires. It's a return to the future, to the thing hoped for and moved toward, all of us, all of us.

Hughes' understanding of America, then, bears some relation to Jesus' intent to manifest the coming reign of God. And there's something very important in Jesus' realization that this was not merely his to make present, that it is indeed all of ours to make present—for indeed, were it less than all, it would not be what it is to be, a wholeness, a completion, a perfection.

It's not so easy being American these days. It's not so easy a thing to *celebrate* being an American these days. But it's not supposed to be. The trouble we're in is the trouble we asked for when we decided against bloodline and tribe, when we decided for a constitution of word and promise and people, plain old people. And that's not easy. But it is beautiful. If you ask me, it's beautiful.

Thanks be to God.