

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 7 2024

Ezekiel 2:1-5; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

Let me take you back to the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus begins his ministry after John is arrested by going throughout the region of Galilee proclaiming the good news of God that “The time is fulfilled and the reign of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news!”

He then begins to gather disciples. Do you remember what Jesus says to them? What the invitation is? “Follow me.” And they respond by... getting up and follow him.

In Mark, Jesus’ call to people is not to believe in him... but to follow him. There is only one time in Mark where the phrase “believe in me” is used in reference to Jesus (Mark 9:42). There are 4 times where Jesus specifically tells people to “follow me.” (Mark 1:17, Mark 2:14, Mark 8:34, Mark 10:21) and many more where you hear about the disciples and crowds that followed him from place to place (Mark 1:18, Mark 2:14, Mark 2:15, Mark 3:7).

Since this seems to be what Jesus wants, it might be good to figure out what does it mean to follow Jesus? Have you ever played follow the leader? I don’t know about you but as children my playmates were pretty good little legalists and if you didn’t jump over the creek in the right way, or get the right footwork, you were out.

So, when you played follow the leader you studied what they did pretty closely so that you could duplicate what they did exactly. Following in that case was not just

watching them, studying them. Following is joining in the activity. Going where they go and doing what they do. As closely as possible.

The Gospel of Mark is my favorite gospel, but I have never seen as clearly as I have through looking at today's text that it does not call us to believe in Jesus, but to follow him. Not just to study his moves, but to get up and follow after him in imitation of him.

We have two vignettes in our reading today. In the first, we get a group of people who know Jesus. They grew up with him. They know his family. And they can't believe that kid is now this person. This is not who a prophet of God is and where he comes from. Important people come from money and/or a lineage. They aren't born and raised in a backwater town and working with their hands. These folks from his hometown can't see it and won't accept it. They know who Jesus is. Jesus doesn't seem to get upset at the rejection. He just shakes his head and goes on his way. Proclaiming all the while. I think this is Jesus deliberately playing Leader to his disciples Followers for their benefit.

Because in the next vignette, Jesus invites the disciples to join him in the proclaiming that is what he has come out to do. Now, let's go back to Mark 1. What is it that Jesus proclaims? What is his message? That the reign of God has come near and people should? Repent. Which means what? Change your thinking. Turn back. And believe in the good news. Which is? That the reign of God has come near. Jesus does not say to these followers he is sending out, go proclaim me! He says, come proclaim with me.

The proclamation is in order that people should change their thinking. The purpose of the proclamation is that people will repent. Change their thinking. From what to what? From thinking like you do in the reign of empire/ the world to the thinking of the reign of God that has come near in Jesus.

What does the thinking of the reign of the world look like? Fear of brute force and power. Rome rules the world at that time through both of those. There is the *Pax Romana*, but it comes at the tip of a sword, through the Roman Legions, and through Roman commerce. The reign of the world is about keeping power through any means. It is a place where a man can be beheaded because the ruler swore a drunken oath. Where you can be arrested for not worshipping the right god. Where each person or group of people looks out for their own good.

What does the thinking of the reign of God look like that is different from the reign around them? I think Paul in his letter to the Corinthians has an answer to this one, it is a place where power comes to completion/fullness in weakness. Jesus on the cross. God's power on display, Paul says. The reign of God is one where those on the fringes are healed and brought into the fold. Where those who are sinners and outcast are engaged in community, not ostracized. Where mercy and grace rule the day. Where reconciliation is sought, not destruction. Go to the Gospel of John it is where we love one another in the same way God in Jesus has loved us. Where people are looked at not as potential enemies and competitors, but as those created in the image of God to be treated with respect. Change your thinking.

This is what Jesus invites and empowers us as his followers to do. This is what baptism claims us to do. Not just to believe in Jesus as some fine concept. But to

leave behind those things we know best- our job, our family, our comfortable place in the world as we know it- and follow him, copying his moves. To join him in proclaiming that the reign of God has come near and that change in thinking frees us all! Frees us from the oppression of the thinking of this world. Can you imagine it? If so, then you have already repented. Changed your thinking.

Now, Jesus gives his followers a warning. One very like what God gave to the prophet Ezekiel at the start of his ministry. We heard that in our first reading. Ezekiel is called by God to be a prophet. Now, a prophet in scripture is not a soothsayer. A predictor of the future whose words carry coded meanings. They are mouthpieces of God. They proclaim God's message. Ezekiel is told, I will send you to a people who will not listen to my word. You will proclaim it until you are blue in the face, and they won't respond at all. BUT! They will know they have heard God's word.

Now, Jesus equips his disciples to go out two by two. To take some back-up with them. But they are to pack such that they must depend on the hospitality of those they serve. It's funny if you think about it, Jesus sends them out in such a way that they need help from those they are there to serve. He also tells them to not take advantage of moving on up if people respond well to the message they proclaim. Stay where you are first welcomed.

But Jesus also gives them instructions as to what to do if folks don't want to hear their message. Just move on, he says. Don't curse them. Don't take anything from them. Just accept what is and move on. Just like Jesus did in his hometown.

Just keep spreading the seed of the Word that is the proclamation that God's reign has come near in Jesus and people should change their thinking. It won't

always be received, and you won't always know why, but just take what happens in stride and trust that God will do God's work in making the harvest grow. You just keep following Jesus and proclaiming with him.

How are you doing at following Jesus? Do you honor him, value following him, in your life? Do we imagine that whether we have known Jesus all our lives or just a few years that he still has something to teach us? That there are surprises yet to be discovered?

Or do we imagine we already know who Jesus is and what he does. Have we done what those who knew Jesus best did and so bound our understanding of who he is that he can do no deed of power in us. Not that he can't, but that when we don't even look for him to do so, how can it happen?

Friends, I am an imperfect follower of Jesus. I don't always honor and value him above other things in my life. I am imperfect in following him and proclaiming that his reign has come near.

But I do know from experience that there is always more to be discovered in following him. And each discovery frees me. Each transforms my thinking. Perhaps a little closer to that reign of God thinking. And that transformed thinking changes how I am and act. For the better for me and the world.

This life of following Jesus is not something that can be boiled down to three steps or four rules. It is not just about being together in worship (although that is a great way to hear God's Word and encounter the risen Christ). It is about daily steps. Not necessarily big, but certainly consistent. Steps in reading scripture.

Steps in praying without ceasing. Steps in recognizing those who are on the fringes. Steps in approaching them and seeking to make them whole.

It is not always easy. Just look at Jesus' disciples and how they are treated. But it is always worth it. Worth it to escape the oppressive and depressing thinking of the reign of this world and replace it with the vibrancy and life-giving thinking of the reign of God.

Friends, you have been called and equipped by God for this. Through the lifegiving waters of baptism and the Holy Spirit that has given you a unique set of gifts and abilities essential for the mission and ministry of following Jesus into the world. Jesus has given you this community, just as he sent those twelve out two by two. For support, encouragement, and to keep us from getting distracted. He has provided us with food for the journey- his own Body and Blood, the Word that is both what we proclaim and shows us how to follow Jesus.

I invite you to join in following Jesus. To change your stinkin' thinkin' from that of this world to the reign of God. And then to proclaim that Good News to others in all that you say and do. To bear witness to that reign come near so that others might repent. That they too might know the life-giving and life-changing love of God come to us in Jesus Christ.