

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

June 27, 2021

Faithful(?) Responses (continued)

Mark 6:1-13

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It dawned on me earlier this week that I was perhaps foolish in my sermon last Sunday. You see, I backed myself into something of a homiletical corner. There is most definitely a theme found in Mark 4:35 through Mark 6:6. As I stated last Sunday we find the author showing the extent of Christ's power; we see him stilling a storm, casting out a legion of demons, healing the woman with the issue of blood, and raising Jairus' daughter from death. And throughout these displays of power, Mark is also examining various reactions to those awesome deeds. Some are faithful responses, the Gerasene demoniac and the hemorrhaging woman. Some we don't really know about, Jesus tells Jairus to not fear, but rather believe, but we never really hear how Jairus responds. And some responses are poor; Jesus asks his disciples why they have no faith after he stills the storm.

Then we have Christ's return to his hometown of Nazareth. And while it still fits with the theme that's been developing, it's not the easiest thing to preach on! Especially the part about Jesus not being able to do much by way of displaying the power of God. Most commentators dedicate little ink to examining this part of the narrative. And I suspect many preachers prefer to focus on the sending of the disciples rather than Christ's inability to exercise divine power. But here I am, set up perfectly to preach on exactly that...and now I'm not sure I want to!

Jesus arrives in his hometown and at first the people there seem open, perhaps even excited about his visit. They are, after all, astounded by his teaching. But things quickly turn sour. The tone shifts to a derogatory one; many scholars agree that the statement in verse 3a, "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?” is likely intended as an insult. By calling Jesus a carpenter they are emphasizing that he has not had rabbinical training and by not mentioning Joseph they are pointing out the unusual circumstances of his birth.

So, this is yet another response to Jesus. They may not have seen the displays of power the way others have, but verse 2c indicates that they have heard about his deeds of power in other places. And their response is derision and disbelief. And we need to acknowledge that this is a familiar response for us as well. We may not like to admit it, but just as we sometimes respond to God faithfully, like the Gerasene demoniac or the hemorrhaging woman, we also sometimes respond unfaithfully, like the frightened disciples or these Nazarenes.

But the next verses really beg the question of what our response means to God. We read in verse 5 that Jesus can “do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” Does that mean that our response to God dictates the extent of God’s power? Most of the commentaries I read in preparing this sermon agree that is not the case, but they struggle to explain why. There are examples elsewhere in Mark’s Gospel of Christ’s power active without any mention of faith. Which would indicate that his power is not reliant on the faith of the people he’s interacting with. But then what do we make of this part of the narrative?

The general consensus seems to be that while faith is crucial, it is not always essential. Several scholars I read used terms like there being a “dampening” effect on Christ’s power in the presence of disbelief. But I don’t much like that. It seems to give humanity too much power.

So, what do we make of this whole situation in Nazareth? Well, I think there’s a perfectly reasonable answer that comes out of recent shifts in our society and culture. Which just goes to show the amazing ability of the Gospel to be relevant throughout time, and to be ahead of its time!

Rather than trying to explain all this by focusing on the disbelief and its possible effects on Christ’s power; I think it makes far more sense, and is more in line with what we know of God, to think about how God prefers to interact with us. Especially in Christ Jesus. You see, I think it boils down to **consent**.

My understanding of God's nature is that God does not wish to impose God's will on humanity. God desires relationship with us, free relationship and love. I do not believe it is in God's nature to force us into faith or into relationship. God is constantly calling out to us and working to return us to right relationship, but it is never forceful. Healthy relationships involve consent! Consent is loving! And God is certainly loving!

Could Christ have simply exercised his power in Nazareth? I believe so, yes. But I don't think, given their comments, the people there were interested in being healed or made whole. They weren't consenting to Christ's work in their lives and Christ is not going to exercise his power in people without their consent.

I think we can even see this idea at work in his instructions to the twelve as he sends them out. He tells them to go where they are welcome and to simply leave if they are not. Sure, they are to shake the dust off their feet if they are rejected, but he does not tell them to go in and force the issue anyway! He does not tell them to forcibly heal, exorcise, or baptize.

This is perhaps a timely thought as we hear of the exposure of the terrible deeds done to First Nations people in Canada in the name of Christianity. And we must understand, that the exact same things were done here in the USA too. As there have been mass graves found under residential schools in Canada, we can find them here too. Christians have forcibly baptized and "Christianized" millions of people around the world over the centuries, without any thought for consent or care for those they were oppressing.

We will hear a lot this weekend about freedom. But with freedom comes responsibility. And a part of that responsibility is acknowledging the rights and freedoms of others. Respecting the idea of consent is one way to help us with that. God does not force faith on us, and we should not force faith on others. God is concerned with consent, and we should be too!

And so, I would invite you to reflect, not just on how you generally respond to God. But also, on how we can be more mindful of others and seek their consent when we wish to do things to or for them. Don't force your kids to hug someone, ask them if they'd like to hug them. Don't tell someone who's hurting to "suck it up," rather acknowledge their pain and if you can, help them process it. If someone refuses an alcoholic beverage, respect their choice and don't badger them or pry as to why they're making it. Consent

and respect for others can be exhibited in a myriad of different ways. But only if we're mindful. We can do so much damage without realizing it!

And when we do harm others, we need to repent and seek reconciliation. As the church universal we have a myriad of sins to repent of. The sins of the residential schools, the mass graves, and the forced baptisms of the past. The sins of judge mentalism and disregard for the pain of our black and brown brothers and sisters. The persecutions still levelled against our LGBTQIA+ neighbors in the name of Christ. We still harm others, we still ignore consent and disrespect people. And, being the broken sinners that we are, I know we will continue to sin against others into the future. But we are still called to try to do better, try to walk the Way of Christ.

God is ultimately mindful of us. God respects our freedom and wants us to be in loving and consensual relationships, both with God and with others! God will even limit God's power, as we see in Nazareth, if the recipients are not consenting. And to follow in the Way of Christ is to be just as mindful, just as loving, just as respectful, and just as concerned with consent, as God is! Amen.

- Pastor Jon Nelson