

5th Sunday Ord Time/Narrative Lectionary Year II
February 9, 2020
Psalm 122, Mark 6:1-29
“Two By Two”

Mark 6:1-29

⁶He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On 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! ³Is 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. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If 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.” ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

¹⁴King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” ¹⁵But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

¹⁷For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him.

When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” ²³And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” ²⁵Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” ²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Pastor: The Word of the Lord. *People: Thanks be to God.*

Today’s scene from Mark 6 describes Jesus going back through his hometown, and he gives us an instruction that is often a warning for people like me: “You cannot be a prophet in your hometown.” As much as I love Batesburg-Leesville, South Carolina, it is not wise for me to serve the little Presbyterian Church there. One reason is the “Powdered Bottom Syndrome.” Those who powdered my bottom as a child are not going to allow me to be their pastor. Another reason is a key feature of ministry in Jesus’ name: he calls us by God to go forth, to leave home to serve, to go out into the world into places unknown to share his teachings and love. God calls us to trust, to have faith, and to be courageous.

At this point in our journey through Mark, Jesus is healing people of all kinds of infirmities, and they are amazed at his power and compassion. Though they experience it first-hand, they still struggle to believe. Mark says, “He is amazed at their unbelief.” All throughout Mark’s story about Jesus is example after example of Jesus revealing who he is as the Son of God, the Savior, the Messiah, our powerful and loving Lord, and people—the sick made well, the disciples, folk just like you and me—just don’t get it!

This reality reminds me of one of the most significant prayers we ever pray: “Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.”

The key focus of our lesson today, something I want us to consider and live into is this: Jesus means for us to do ministry together. Togetherness, working in teams, sharing the load, and helping one another are all essential features of Christian discipleship. Jesus gathers his friends, and he sends them out two by two. The team approach is Jesus' way. Have you ever thought about why this is so important and unique?

Jesus takes a play right out of Moses' book because if you and I will recall, God speaks to Moses in the burning bush to go and command Pharaoh to "let me people Go," and God sends Aaron to go with Moses. Remember that? They are a ministry team. We can be more effective in our ministry when we work together.

Jesus knows firsthand that doing ministry and following God are not easy tasks. Going at it alone can make anybody feel discouraged and depressed. He is so wise, so visionary to call the 12 together and send them out in 6 pairs, right? In addition to fighting loneliness, Jesus pairs up his people so that they can combine their strengths. Whenever you and I go through training and learn new skills, it is more effective to have a partner, a teammate. Pair up. Talk things through. Share your frustrations, your joys. Ask questions. Lean on each other. A good partner provides council, insight, encouragement, and accountability. No golf pro carries his or her bag and plays alone; they all have trusted caddies.

When you and I work with another person do you know what unique benefit we get? Two eyes instead of four. We have someone to watch our backs, someone to be our defender, and someone to help us keep what we are seeing and witnessing in check. Jesus sends the disciples into strange villages and to walk upon dangerous roads. Reading people, navigating crowds, engaging all types of characters--from Pharisees and legal experts to beggars, from those on the margins to the sick and demon possessed—is never easy but easier when serving with a partner.

Do you have a partner in ministry? If not, that is okay. Maybe a good next step for you in your faith growth and development is to cultivate a connection with someone who might become an important part of a ministry team for you. One of the things I have loved about ministry these last 20 years is getting to share the good and the bad with many people—the church staff, the members of ministry committees, the officers (Elders and Deacons). Our witness to Jesus Christ is stronger because of that spirit of teamwork and togetherness.

Please know that you are all invited to get connected with our ministry teams, task forces, committees, groups, and especially with other individuals to share the work God calls us. If you ever want to explore what that means for you, please let Julie or me or Forrest or one of our officers know.

So Mark tells us that Jesus calls disciples together and sends them out two-by-two. Did you catch from where their authority comes? Please do not miss this vital detail. As disciples, our authority comes from Jesus, the one who gathers us, trains us, and sends us. The work of ministry—telling people about God, listening to them, caring about their illnesses, casting out demons, helping, encouraging, problem solving—these are all tasks that the Spirit of Jesus Christ equips us to do. Our power does not come from the church or from the state; it is a spiritual power that comes from God and God’s incarnate Son, Jesus.

Here is what it looks like, I think. Many times over the years, I have gone to a home of a church member or to a hospital room with a colleague or an Elder or Deacon and made a visit. I tell them, “We are here in the name of Jesus Christ and on behalf of your church family, who loves you, who are praying for you, and we want you to know that God cares about what you are dealing with and that you are not alone.” Many times this news is greeted with smiles and tears and sacred embraces. The name of Jesus carries authority, holiness, and love. I hope we will all call upon that holy name in our moments of need and together share that name with others in their moments of need. We need to say it, and the world needs to hear it.

Our lesson from Mark today offers a bit of a warning for all disciples, and the warning has to do with the cost of following Jesus, a very high cost that faithful people such as John the Baptizer paid with his life. John prepared the way for Jesus. He preached, baptized, prayed, and encouraged many. Herod arrests him and executes him. It is sad and tragic, but disciples in every age must remember that following Jesus and being faithful to our calling can be very demanding of us.

The larger word, however, is that the Herods of the world with their evil and violence never get the last word. God does. Mark tells us in our lesson that though John dies, God raises him to new life. Herod hears of it and announces it too! What are you and I to make of the reality that the writer of Mark puts the good news of John’s triumph over the powers of evil and death upon the very lips of the one who takes his life? Mark is silent about how the resurrection happens. We are just told that it is so, and it is great news!

Will you remember the great news of God for you today? Will you? You and I are never alone. God in Christ calls us to work together. God send us out two by two. As God sends us, we have the wonderful power of the name of Jesus Christ to share with others. Will you share it? Will you tell the wonderful stories of God's love and God's amazing grace? If not you, then who? As you share it, please do not forget the cost of God's amazing grace. Many good and faithful people have paid the ultimate sacrifice to be faithful to their high and holy calling.

We cannot be guaranteed easy discipleship, but we can trust that God sees us and no matter what struggles we face, God raises us in the power of his love to overcome them.

I would like to let the late folk singer, David M. Bailey, have the last word today with these lyrics from his song: "No Matter What It Takes."

"Love was here before us, and love will see us through. No matter where we are. No matter what we do. Love can be confusing but love makes no mistakes. And I'll love you for forever, no matter what it takes.

He said 'life is much too short to worry 'bout such things, so welcome this new day and whatever it brings.' All I want to know then the day comes to an end is that you're laughing on the outside, my sweet forever friend.

Love was here before us, and love will see us through. No matter where we are. No matter what we do. Love can be confusing, but love makes no mistakes. And I'll love you for forever, no matter what it takes."

To God be the glory. Amen.