

**Sunday, July 4, 2021**  
**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 9 (Year B)**

Mark 6.1-13

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/2921283244827141>

*(Sermon begins at about 23:00)*

**“Ministry Pointers”**

Our Gospel reading for today is comprised of two stories. While each have their own theme, they share a common focus on the nature of ministry. Providing some pointers for us as we engage in our own ministries.

In the first part of the Gospel reading, we hear that Jesus is in his hometown of Nazareth, where he is teaching in the synagogue. Those who heard him teach and preach were absolutely astounded. “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him?” (Mk 6.2). Sounds like they were pretty amazed at what they were hearing. Jesus was making quite the impression. Until you get to the rest of the commentary. “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?” (Mk 6.3a). We are then told “And they took offense at him” (Mk 6.3b). They were impressed with what they were hearing until they stopped to realize, “Hey wait! This is ‘little Jesus.’ He’s one of us. We know his family. We knew him when he was knee-high to a grasshopper.” And that’s when things started to go south.

It’s unclear why they took offense at what Jesus was preaching, and why only after they stopped to think about who he was, that he was one of them. Maybe they were jealous of the local, small town boy who made good. Maybe they couldn’t accept the fact that the son of a carpenter, a carpenter himself, could somehow become so knowledgeable, could be so eloquent. Or maybe it’s just human nature that we get an image of people fixed in our minds. Sure, they remember Jesus “when,” and somehow don’t realize that time has passed. That Jesus has gone on with his life—a life outside of Nazareth. A life that they have no frame of reference for.

I remember years ago, around the mid-90s, and I was at my parents’ church for something. The church I had gone to in high school. Several people asked me when I was going to be graduating from college. The thing was, I had graduated like 10 years before and was already well-established in my (first) career. I found it rather humorous that they seemed to have been oblivious to the fact that nearly 15 years had passed since they last saw me. But they remembered me when I was in high school, when I went off to college. And even though my parents had undoubtedly mentioned me during the intervening years, their image was still of high school senior Michael, not grown-up, professional Michael. They did not have a frame of reference for who I had become.

I think this is what is happening in our Gospel reading. The people of Nazareth have no frame of reference for seeing Jesus in his role as a teacher. Their only frame of reference is what they

remember of him growing up, which colors their perception of him, and more importantly, their perception of the veracity of what he is teaching. In general, remembering an authority figure when they were “one of us” serves to diminish their authority; decreases their ability to be effective in their newer role. Just as we saw in the Gospel: “And [Jesus] could do no deed of power there” (Mk 6.5). Except for the odd healing. Which may have been among those who did not happen to know Jesus previously.

The second part of the Gospel shifts the emphasis from Jesus to the twelve apostles. Jesus sends the twelve out two-by-two. The primary reason was probably safety in numbers. Traveling between villages, in the middle of the open countryside, could be dangerous. One never knew when one might encounter bandits seeking to take advantage of solo travelers. But also, there would have been some benefit of doing ministry in teams. Not everyone would have the same gifts and talents. Having two disciples together would expand the scope of what they could handle by broadening their experience base. Working together would also mean sharing the workload so that one person would not have to do it all by himself. The added benefit would be having someone to provide support in ministry. Ministry can be a demanding and lonely vocation, so working in partnership would mean having mutual support when things got rough, or when one or the other became demoralized that things were not going as hoped or expected.

One of the things that seems a little strange in Jesus’ instructions to the twelve—at least to us—is that “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” (Mk 6.8-9). Taking a staff is understandable, given that walking was the primary mode of transportation in which a staff could come in handy, particularly in the hilly and rocky terrain of Galilee. But why Jesus did not want them to take anything else may seem odd to us. This could have been for several reasons. First, having nothing with them would help to signal who they were, what their purpose was. Carrying nothing would have signaled their status as itinerant preachers, as opposed to merchants or beggars. Merchants would have been loaded down with their wares. And beggars typically carried at least a begging bowl with which to receive alms, be it money or food. But an itinerant preacher carried nothing, signaling that he was available to share his message in exchange for hospitality—food or lodging, as appropriate. We need to remember that hospitality to strangers was the norm. It was expected that people would take care of traveling strangers. There were, after all, no roadside rest stops, no Motel 6s, no restaurants. There may have been inns in larger communities, but this would have been the exception rather than the rule. People in more rural areas would have been happy to share a little food or provide a bed for the night in exchange for news from distant places or a good story or an interesting sermon. And hospitality shown to those on holy missions was highly valued. So, in a way, taking nothing with them signaled their purpose and gave a higher probability of being welcomed into people’s homes. Giving them an entrée to what Jesus really wanted the apostles to accomplish: to share the Good News.

The other reason for not taking any provisions would have been that having bags or extra clothing would have meant the need to keep track of these things; the need to care for them. By taking nothing with them, there would be nothing to distract them from their real purpose:

to engage in ministry. Without distraction, they would be free to focus all their time and energy on preaching and healing and casting out unclean spirits.

Jesus' final instruction to them was that "Whenever 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" (Mk 6.11). Staying in one place is meant to indicate they are not to look for a place that has better food or nicer accommodations. They are not on vacation. They are out in the field on a mission. They are to focus on the job at hand and not worry about the quality of the hospitality they receive.

And then there is the "shaking the dust off their feet," which is a foreign concept to us. In the first century Near East, shaking the dust off one's feet was a sign of censure against those who rejected one's message or refused to hear what one had to say. It was a symbolic way of showing separation from what was perceived as a wrong action. A way of saying "you made the wrong choice in rejecting our message, and more importantly, you made the wrong choice by rejecting the one we follow, the Messiah."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, ministry is a bit different in our own time. Other than missionaries, who are often sent out with minimal resources, we are not generally sent out with the same restrictions or requirements that Jesus placed on the twelve. Although some of the principles still apply. As we prepare to engage in some formal discernment about the nature and shape of our parish ministries, maybe we can learn some lessons from Jesus and his disciples about what it means to do ministry. About the essentials of engaging in ministry.

First, we change and grow, and along with that, our experiences, our knowledge, our skills and talents, all change over time. Our interests can change over time, leading us to stretch ourselves and engage in new forms of ministry. There is always a danger in being stuck in the same role, the same ministry. We tend to fall into the "we've always done it that way" mentality and don't look for new and better ways of doing things. We can get stuck. Which can lead to burnout. This is why it is a good idea to change things up periodically. Bring in new blood. Get a fresh perspective. This is what keeps ministries vibrant and meaningful—to those engaged in ministry, but also for those who are the recipients of what we have to offer.

Second and closely related is the fact that ministry is not generally a "lone ranger" operation. Ministry is a partnership, in which we work with others. In this way, we have a broader range of skills, gifts, and talents at our disposal. When working with others in ministry, we create the opportunity for fresh perspectives. We have the opportunity for the sharing of new ideas. We have the resources to test out new ways of doing things. Again, keeping it fresh and vibrant and meaningful—to those engaged in ministry, but also for those who are the recipients of what we have to offer. And undergirding all of this is that doing ministry in partnership provides built-in support for those engaged in ministry. After all, ministry can be challenging, even difficult. Sometimes we need others to hold us up when we become tired or overwhelmed by certain aspects of our ministries.

Third, when we engage in ministry, we are to do so whole-heartedly. Not be distracted by other concerns. Ministry is holy work, worthy of our full attention. Our ministries are our gift to God

and our gift to others who are in need of what we have to offer. They—God and others—deserve our best efforts. Our ministry is a gift of love. Our ministry doesn't just say something about who we are. It also says something about the One we follow, about the One we serve. Our ministries send a message to those we are serving that "you are loved, by me and by God; you are cared for, by me and by God; right here and right now, you are the most important person in the world, to me and to God."

Finally, and perhaps most important as far as I'm concerned, is how all this ties in with hospitality. Hospitality is about inviting in. About being invited in. Ministry is not about us doing unto others. Rather, to the extent possible, it is about doing ministry with others. It is about inviting those whom we are called to serve into partnership. The old adage of "give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." While our ministries may meet immediate needs, the goal is to help others live into the fullness of who God created them to be.

As we slowly emerge from pandemic lock-down conditions and return to our normal ministries, we are not unlike the twelve, being sent out to minister in Jesus' name. The twelve needed a few pointers on what to do. Maybe we need those same pointers since we are probably a little rusty. And even if not, a periodic refresher isn't a bad idea. Particularly when we are engaged in something as sacred and holy as ministering to and with God's beloved children.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaking\\_the\\_dust\\_from\\_the\\_feet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaking_the_dust_from_the_feet)