

**Sunday, July 7, 2024**  
**Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9B)**

Mark 6.1-13

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1033777068318253>

*(Sermon begins at about 20:10 – problems with audio)*

**“Breaking Out of Our Comfort Zones”**

The two things clergy hate to hear are “we’ve always done it that way” and “we’ve never done it that way.” Common responses from parishioners whenever the priest wants to change something in the parish. Of course, this is not limited to parish settings. As a general rule, we humans are not particularly fond of change. Particularly not when we are comfortable, or at least not terribly uncomfortable. Aptly characterized by such aphorisms as “don’t rock the boat” and “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” When things are not going well, we might entertain the idea of change, but even then, it can be difficult to try something new, to do things a different way. Likely out of fear of the unknown. Aptly characterized by such aphorisms as “better the devil you know.”

Under such circumstances, when confronted with the prospect of change, particularly when it is something new or different or completely unknown, our tendency is to attack, criticize, even demonize. To attack, criticize, or demonize the one trying to introduce the new change, the new perspective: “Who does he think he is, coming in here and trying to change things?” Or, in a seemingly, albeit ever-so-slightly more gentle approach, to attack or criticize the proposed change without considering the merits: “That will never work” or “What a stupid idea.”

We see some of this resistance playing out in today’s Gospel reading, although on a more subtle level. Jesus has returned to his hometown of Nazareth. Being the good Jewish boy that he was, come the Sabbath, he goes to synagogue to worship. We are told that he began to teach, which would certainly imply that the local rabbi, probably knowing of Jesus’ reputation as a teacher, invited him to preach that day. The initial reception is mixed, to say the least. Those present reacted by saying “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?”

It’s almost as if they are first in awe of the new perspective that Jesus is presenting, but then realize just who this is. “Wait. This is little Jesus. We’ve known him since he was knee-high to a grasshopper. Who does he think he is coming in here and trying to teach us something new. Telling us new things about our God.” Sadly, not uncommon. As they say, “you can never go home.” Mainly because while we have moved on and grown up, those who knew us when we were younger still think of us in the way they knew us “way back when.” On several occasions I experienced this when I would go back to the church I attended in high school. The church my parents still attended. As an adult, even into my 30s, I would get asked such questions as “when are you going to graduate from college?” “Umm, I graduated like 10 years ago and now have a

career.” It’s as if, when we leave our childhood home, those who knew us back then still see us as we were. Not as we are. Failing to see that we have grown, developed, changed.

Now, admittedly, in Jesus’ case, this seems to be a bit more pronounced. They not only see Jesus as the person he was years ago. They are not able to accept what he says, because it is inconsistent with their image of him. And perhaps because what he says is challenging who they are and what they believe. He has moved on and broadened his horizons, while they have not. I experienced something of this right after I was ordained. I went back to the parish that raised me up to ministry. I had been invited to preach one last time before I started my first position as a deacon. It was Trinity Sunday and, admittedly, I pushed the envelope a little with my perspective. At least, as far as some present were concerned. Mainly in that I referred to the Holy Spirit as “she.” Which really is how I think of the Spirit, and which actually has scriptural support based on some Old Testament writings. After the service, a couple of women whom I had known for over 15 years confronted me in the parish hall and told me there is no way the Holy Spirit can be a woman because Mary conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Proof that God and the Holy Spirit are male. They went on to chastise me and tell me that I needed to forget all that radical stuff they taught me in seminary and stick to the Bible. What was it Jesus said? “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” Despite it really being God’s house.

Those women were not able to hear the message I was preaching of a broader and more expansive view of our God and of the Trinity. Partly because of the new perspective I presented, but also because they remembered me when I was a lay parishioner, like them. Just as the people of Nazareth were not able to hear Jesus’ broader and more expansive view, his experience, of God. In other words, the people of Nazareth were locked into a particular perspective—about Jesus, about God, about their beliefs—that they were not open to even considering any of those perspectives. To considering the possibility of change. As a result, they missed out on a great opportunity. To learn from one of their own. To learn from one who knew them better than any other teacher that might wander through town. One who knew their way of life, their struggles, their joys. One who could relate to them in a way that no other holy teacher possibly could. They missed out on the opportunity to learn something new about God and about their relationship with God, taught in a way that could have spoken directly to who and where they were.

After leaving Nazareth, undoubtedly saddened that the people who probably could have benefited most from his teaching because of their unique relationship, Jesus decides to send the twelve disciples out “two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.” This is no coincidence.

Jesus must have realized that if he met with resistance from his own hometown—most of the people who were actually related to him as kin to Mary or Joseph—then the disciples would surely meet with resistance from strangers they would eventually be called to minister to. He was a little more experienced, not to mention having some divine insight. He knew and understood the potential pitfalls of being an itinerant preacher and healer. Or he thought he did, until the situation in Nazareth opened his eyes to even broader realities. After all, why

would he have thought that those who had known him his whole life would be reluctant to hear his message, resistant to expanding their own lives of faith?

Jesus decided, based on their experience in Nazareth, that the time was right for the disciples to venture out on their own. To gain some experience in ministering on their own. To be put in new and unexpected situations as a way of stretching and growing both their faith and the ministerial skills. Just as Jesus met with an unexpected situation in Nazareth. He sends them out in pairs so they would have safety in numbers, but also to support one another and even learn from each other. In the hopes that in pairs, they could figure things out together. To have a reality check, as well as support and consolation if—when—things did not go so well.

Perhaps, he also sent them out right after the Nazareth debacle to hopefully provide them with some positive experiences. After all, the disciples were likely a little concerned that if Jesus was not able to get through to the people of his hometown, how would they get through to strangers. Better to get them out in the field and hopefully have some wins to counteract the loss he experienced back in Nazareth.

“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.” There is method to the apparent madness. Not taking anything with them was a way of establishing them as itinerant preachers, which were actually viewed with respect. As opposed to being beggars who customarily carried a bowl to receive alms or food. Also, this was a way to ensure that they would be fully immersed in their work. Not taking anything that would distract from their mission and would also signal to those they encountered that they were in need of hospitality. And locals were generally more than willing to provide hospitality to itinerant preachers and healers, hoping that in doing so, they would be blessed.

More importantly, Jesus tells 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.” In other words, try your best and if you are not welcomed, simply leave. Don’t waste your time or cause yourself any heartache by sticking around and beating your heads against a wall. They are to move on with no further thought. There are plenty out there in need of hearing the Good News and of receiving healing.

The long and the short of it is that Jesus was helping the disciples to break out of their comfort zone. Just as the people of Nazareth were not willing or able to break out of their comfort zone. He was providing them with an opportunity to explore and figure out what works and what does not work. To avoid any specter that there is one right way to engage in ministry. That ministry is, by its very nature, situational. Each encounter requiring a unique approach. There’s no room for “we’ve always done it that way” or “we’ve never done it that way.” For them, it was all new. And by all accounts, they were successful: “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.”

We generally want to play it safe. To be comfortable. To stick to what is tried and true. But ministry is not about playing it safe. Ministry is not about always being comfortable. And in

ministry, the tried and true does not always work. To engage in ministry—to effectively engage in ministry—means being willing to break out of our comfort zones. To go out into the world and engage those who are most in need of hearing the Good News of the Gospel, of experiencing God’s love. And when it comes to that, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Each of us is unique. Each person we encounter in the course of ministry is unique. By God’s grace we are brought together to provide what is needed at that moment, in ways that only we can provide. That is the challenge of ministry. That is the beauty of ministry. That is the joy of ministry.

As we continue to engage in our ministries—individually and as a parish—let us be open to those new and exciting ways that we can proclaim God’s love in the world. If we are open to possibilities and to the opportunities that are presented to us, not only will those we minister to be blessed, we will also be blessed. By the encounters we have, and with a broader and more expansive perspective that will serve us in our ministries and expand our own lives of faith.