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First Presbyterian Church  
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Mark 6: 1-13

**“Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism:  
How to Witness to Our Faith in a Pluralistic Country”**

I know I said in my weekly enews letter that I was going to preach about the myth of the Christian nation as a part of my sermon series on rescuing the Bible from fundamentalism. But I had forgotten that I addressed that topic last October when I preached on the intersection of faith and politics. If you’re interested in reading what I said about that, you can look up my sermon from October 11, 2020 on the church website.

So instead, I’m going to preach on what the Bible says about witnessing to our faith. Given the prescribed lectionary reading for today from Mark, and given the great divide in our country, it seems like a more fitting subject. How do we witness to our faith in a pluralistic country, and what guidance does the Bible give about that? If one were to listen to the religious pundits on cable news talk shows, one would think there is only one way to be a true American Christian.

But our story for today, as so many Bible stories are, is much more nuanced than that. It doesn’t lay out a prescription for how we should feel about reproductive rights, guns, or prayer in schools, topics some Christians believe have only one right answer, but instead our story paints a picture about how our actions in society mirror our true beliefs.

So let’s dive in to today’s story and see what it might teach us about how to behave in this country we love.

Someone once wrote that Mark is a story of disruption. Beginning with the story of the arrival of the Holy Spirit through the shredded heavens and ending with a tomb that used to hold a corpse, the Gospel describes the arrival of something new. And although many people fail to see this new thing, it still creates transformation through altered boundary lines, conflicts about authority, and the arrival of new realities that are a part of what Jesus calls the reign of God. It’s also

important to note that the message Jesus proclaims is expansive, and often encounters opposition and confusion.

After recording a series of astonishing deeds – calming a stormy sea, destroying a legion of demons, unintentionally healing a long-suffering woman, and bringing a dead girl back to life – the narrator follows Jesus to his hometown. There, the story takes a different turn. After at first being amazed, the people of his hometown are scandalized by Jesus and reject him. Who cares what he says or does, they ask? He cannot be worth respecting or following.

Apparently, the people in Nazareth see things or know things that other people do not. When the crowd refers to him without referring to his father, they seem to imply that this grown son has left a widowed mother and siblings to fend for themselves while he travels around Galilee leading a movement. As such, this village of fewer than 1000 people, sides with his family.

Now, I want to stop here and point out that we can't really blame them for that. They only know part of the picture of what Jesus does and who he really is, and with only part of a picture, it's impossible to see the whole picture. So they go after Jesus, whispering amongst themselves in their homes and living rooms and anywhere they can find a sympathetic crowd, about what an awful person he is for treating his mother and brothers like he did.

At a very surface reading, this turn of events in Jesus' life and the rude reception of his hometown might mirror the reality of highs and lows in the life of the church and in our ministries. There are seasons in the life of the church when we find ourselves riding high in ministry, when it seems our ministries are strong and effective, and when our witness to the community seems to have the capacity to change the world. I love these seasons, and I bet you do, too – when it seems we can do no wrong and all is well and everyone is happy.

Then there are the Jesus-in-Nazareth seasons; times when every faithful act seems to be thwarted by circumstances or by people – sometimes people we know and love – who seem opposed to every action, every new ministry, and every attempt at healing and wholeness. We do not love these seasons in the church life; this church has known such seasons like that and lived through them. Every church has. Every pastor has. I'm often reminded during these seasons of what a wise old Elder at my former church used to say to me: put on your flak

jacket, Annie. Most pastors have a flak jacket that is well worn. This is a reality of ministry for both pastors and members; our comfort in this reality is that Jesus wore a flak jacket, too.

This story reminds us that sometimes we face obstacles even when we do the right thing. Sometimes we face obstacles even when we're faithful. Jesus knew that it was impossible to get everyone on board all the time, but that you had to move forward anyway before the train derailed. "Shake the dust from your feet", he told the disciples, "and move on".

In our country's current contentious landscape, it's important to think about how our actions are a reflection of what we believe. How do we see Jesus, and how does this view bear witness to what we believe? What picture of Jesus does our community see in and through us?

A few years ago in my old presbytery, I served on an Administrative Commission for a church that was pulling out of the denomination. It is probably the hardest thing I've ever had to do as a presbyter. The church was large, 2000 or so members, maybe the largest in the presbytery, and sat on a valuable piece of land. For those of you not familiar with our polity, members can choose to leave the PC(USA) at any time, but if a congregation chooses to leave they can't take their property with them because the presbytery holds it in trust. Commission members received both hateful and supportive emails, though mostly hateful. The pastor had been working with the congregation for a number of years by then, and so the members were more than willing to follow him out the door.

It was a long, hard, bitter, and costly fight. "How does this witness to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?" one of the commission members asked during one of our meetings. We all knew the answer to his question. Sure, we understood why we had to do what we did: we had an obligation to the presbytery and the property they held in trust, and to the people who didn't want to leave their church; but it sure wasn't the witness we wanted to give to the world.

As we think about how to witness to our faith in this glorious, imperfect, rather contentious, very divided, pluralistic nation, it behooves us to remember that actions speak louder than words. The townspeople's actions limited what Jesus was able to accomplish. Likewise, our actions and our words can limit what we can accomplish in our country. This does not mean, however, that God's actions

are dependent on what we do or don't do, but this does mean that each one of us is invited to think about the role we play in sensing, experiencing, and making known God's will and work in the world.

Friends, people of faith need to remember that human beings are capable of something better than selfishness and self-interest. It's our responsibility to remind ourselves and our society that people are capable of rising above what is good for me to consider what is good for all of us. It is what Abraham Lincoln meant in the midst of the darkest, most dangerous time in our nation's history when he appealed to "the better angels of our nature."

"We are not enemies, but friends," Lincoln said in his First Inaugural address. "We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Our calling is not to just say what we believe. Our calling is not to just talk about what we believe. Our calling is to act on it. Act with kindness. Act with compassion. Act with justice. Act with movement that brings about the kingdom of God – light, peace, joy, and justice for all.

Amen.

Sources:

Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, commentary of Mark 6:1-13

The Soul of America, the Battle for our Better Angels, Jon Meacham