

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
July 7, 2024
Mark 6:1-13

“Be Thou My Vision”

Today we come to our 4th and final hymn in our March Madness hymn bracket with “Be Thou My Vision”. Dating to the 8th century, Be Thou My Vision is by far the oldest of all 4 hymns we’ve looked at.

According to mythology, when St. Patrick was a missionary in Ireland in the 5th century, King Logaire of Tara decreed that no one was allowed to light any fires until a pagan festival was begun by the lighting of a fire on Slane Hill. In a move of defiance against this pagan ritual, St. Patrick did light a fire, and, rather than execute him, the king was so impressed by his devotion that he let Patrick continue his missionary work. Three centuries later, a monk wrote the Irish poem, “Be Thou My Vision” to remember and honor the action and faith of St. Patrick. Then in the early 20th century, Mary Elizabeth Byrne translated the poem into English, and in 1912, Eleanor Hull versified the text into what is now a well-loved hymn and prayer that reminds us that at every moment of our lives, God should be our vision above all else.

Let me repeat that: that every moment of our lives, God should be our vision above all else.

I can’t think of a more fitting message for Christians to hear as we conclude the July 4th holiday, continue to witness to the co-opting of our faith with Christian nationalism, and enter another contentious presidential election that we’re probably all dreading. At the very heart of religious faith is a deep and profound commitment that exceeds all other commitments, including commitment to party and country; and that is an affirmation that God, and God’s ways, will be our vision above everything else.

Unfortunately, this is not what we’re witnessing these days. Jesus may have sent out the disciples with authority to teach and preach as we hear in today’s story, but we are wise to parse out that authority carefully and with grace. Despite what some may think, Jesus does not authorize his emissaries to go

out as blowhards or know-it-alls. Nor are they sent to “claim the culture” for him or anyone else. They are guests, humbly willing to commit themselves to the well-being of the people they encounter. It’s a frightfully important responsibility for the disciples that extends to us, and we shouldn’t shirk from it just because others misuse it so badly.

Familiarity breeds contempt, as the old saying goes, and no one group displayed this better than Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth. After performing great miracles on both shores of the Sea of Galilee and even in the middle of it, Jesus returns to the town where he grew up and (where he) lived an ordinary life. And when he gets there he does what any Jewish teacher would do: he goes to the synagogue, where he teaches the hometown crowd. Maybe it’s the unexpectedness of the whole event that causes the crowd’s reaction. After all, they’re not expecting to see “little Jesus” who grew up around the corner, or “Jesus the carpenter” who built their tables and benches, in the role of wise prophet of God. Obviously, his teaching astounds them but it also strikes a nerve.

At first, they’re captivated. “Where did this man get all this?” they ask. “What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!” But that is when familiarity hits home and turns into contempt. “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” they ask. “And they took offense at him,” Mark writes. In other words, they reason, who does he think he is? We know he’s just one of us, not some miracle worker.

Now, what prompts such a negative, outrageous response to Jesus from the neighbors in Nazareth? For that matter, what prompts such a negative, outrageous response in us, when someone acts in a way that doesn’t “fit” our self-imposed opinion of him or her or match the stereotype we’ve prescribed? I’m not convinced most of us wouldn’t act like the townspeople do.

I’ve been reading the book “The Bill of Obligations: The Ten Habits of Good Citizens” (I’m going to offer this book as our first Touchy Topic book study in September). In the book, the author states, “We all live in a context, in a society. We have a stake in the overall well-being of that society, which in turn

translates into our having a stake in the well-being of our fellow citizens. As poet and priest John Donne wrote, 'No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.' There are both moral and practical reasons for caring about our fellow Americans."

The author is right, of course. Religion insists that how we care for one another, how we treat one another, and how we extend a helping hand to the poor, the weakest among us, the children, or the elderly, is a core value. Religion also insists that public officials be honest and trustworthy and accountable. But it also insists that as a people we have obligations and responsibilities. Certainly, Christians have a responsibility to advocate for the poor and the marginalized, and, as the Bible says over and over, welcome the sojourner, the alien, and the immigrant which at one time, we all were. We also have an obligation to treat others as we would like to be treated. Maybe this is why Jesus told the disciples to take nothing with them when they go out on their own to witness to him because there are things they – and we – should leave behind.

Chief among them would be the need to be right and vilify those we think are wrong.

We would all be better off if we left our combat boots at home and checked our arsenal of bullet points at the gate. And maybe, as we learn to jettison more of our extra baggage, we'll discover generosity in places we would never have thought to look for it. We may even find that the people we have preconceived notions about have gifts we need to receive and treasure if there's any chance of overcoming this deep polarization.

And while we're leaving our big suitcase at home, maybe we should shake some of the dust off our sandals too, and by dust I mean:

- the stuff we cling to so we can throw it back in someone's face, or produce it as evidence in the case we're building against them;
- the psychological strings that attach us to a confrontation or disagreement, so that it defines us or diminishes our sense of call;
- the dust bowl of cynicism, fear, and futility we walk around in every day, which if we pack it in our emotional suitcase and bring it home, will be toxic to our spirit;

We need to remember that as Christians our allegiance is to God and God's vision above all else. What picture of Jesus does our community see in and through us?

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 vision for 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."

So let us pack our suitcases and set out with kindness and compassion. Let's pack that which makes justice *for all, and* peace and joy, too. Because this is God's vision for people. So leave the other stuff behind.

Amen.