

Gospel: Mark 6: 1-13

word count: 1,878

The Fourth of July Parade is a big event where I live. It is an old-fashioned small-town affair held in a neighborhood of old homes, shaded by mature eucalyptus trees and welcoming to a diverse group of residents. Million dollar homes stand next to bungalow courts. Enormous craftsman houses occupy large lots, save for that parcel that was sold off here and there sixty years ago, where the small mid-century homes with modest fences squeezed themselves in. It is a place where people have made room for each other across all divides—the investment banker lives next to the family with the gardening business. The widow of the famous composer lives across the street from the unemployed secretary. I say, “Hello,” on a morning run as they talk and laugh, while their children play together.

On the Fourth of July, our neighbors gather a block away to celebrate—and what they celebrate; life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, is evident in the richness of color, diversity of culture, and what it means to make up family—traditional and otherwise.

Those who have festooned their bicycles in streamers and whirligigs, or overdressed themselves in red, white and blue—meet at the parade starting point. It is marked in chalk on the street, and is already occupied by homemade cardboard floats and a multitude of dogs, made nervous both by the costumes that have been sausage onto them, and by the subsequent attention they are receiving for their unwitting impersonations of Lady Liberty and Uncle Sam.

Our newest neighbor is introduced to a long-time resident, and together they lead us in singing our national anthem in perfect harmony; the African-American mom and the Caucasian lesbian, their respective partners beaming from the sidelines. Then, the parade starts off—but not too far. It circles the block, and a certain number of us choose to remain on the sidelines so that they will have someone there to applaud them when they come back around the corner in ten minutes.

The fire department is there to cook hot-dogs, and later the big red engine will clang its way down the street for the kids to climb on board. Water balloons are hurled randomly, and on one lawn, the burlap sack race is underway and competitive. Across the street, a neighbor pokes his head out his door, only remotely surprised that an aging rock band is playing on his lawn, tapped into his electricity, while their 65-ish guitarist imitates Jimi Hendrix’ version of “the Star Spangled Banner.” He listens for a while, and then goes back inside as if this happens every day.

Water is sprayed and eggs are indelicately tossed and not caught, causing screams. Food spreads out across tables that cover an entire front yard. People meet for the first time or catch up with neighbors they have not seen in months. Noisy caps are exploded, knees are skinned, and the pony-ride is missing this year because of consciousness raising by an animal rights activist.

Instead of a pony, the tastefully dressed, demure matriarch who has lived on our block since 1935, and who has seen our neighborhood change more than anyone, is helped into a mud-splattered dune buggy covered in slogans about liberation in Spanish. A few tattooed young men help her on with a helmet, and she bolts away for her turn to feel today’s freedom—in the wind, the speed, and in the embrace of all that which has had to change in order for us all to be able to be together today.

It’s “Hoke” with a capital, “H,” and I wouldn’t miss it.

It is also an example of the advancement of God's realm and the working towards the realization of a dream, celebrated in our own unique context as "American," but really more fitting in the universal sense as the dream deferred for all of humanity; the dream for which we hold hope.

We live in an old neighborhood, where a few 19th century farmhouses still stand looking out at the land they sold off to make this early 20th century development exclusively for middle-class white people. Because of the long and difficult pursuit of justice and the seriousness with which forward thinking people took the commandment to love God and their neighbor as themselves, the neighborhood has become more of a reflection of that love. Not one of the "isms" is important here—everyone is welcome—just as everyone is welcome to this church.

We have come so far—and have so far to go. We still need our prophets and seekers of justice—but who listens to prophets, anyway?

Jesus returned to his hometown and to his family, and felt the energy go right out of him. He spoke at his synagogue, and they said, "Hey, where'd you get all this stuff? Who do you think YOU are?" You're Mary and Joe's kid.

This is the passage where we find out that Jesus is from a large family—he is one of at least seven—his brothers are listed by name (James, Joses, Judas and Simon) and it states that he has sisters (plural, so at least two).

Most of us know that whatever has happened to us that gives us a sense of "self" in the world, once we go home we are always the kid that did those embarrassing things that our family receives such joy in reminding us of so often. Any authority we have achieved elsewhere evaporates once we pull into the driveway.

Jesus goes home and sees his family—how do you suppose his brothers and sisters will react to him talking the way he talks? How do yours treat you?

"Hello, mother. Hello, my brothers and sisters. You know...as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."

Chances are that Jesus wouldn't get out more than two sentences before he was hit in the kisser with a fig pie. No-one's brother or sister is gonna let you get away with high-flown prose like that! "Son of God? Pphhhh! Remember that thing you did in the cow stall? They made ME clean it up! Son of WHO did you say you were?"

Because he felt so disempowered, he could do very little while he was there—no one would take him seriously. You can read in this passage how this affected him. He tells his disciples to go off to the villages two-by-two, and "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."

If Jesus and his disciples would not be welcomed—if they could not receive a serious hearing about the a message that would help bring about a community that through love could recognize the inherent worth of each human being, then they should shake off the dust of that community and go where they felt welcomed.

There is a story about Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what he said in these lines. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The

guests responded with phrases like, “Wonderful! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir.” It wasn’t until the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Nonplussed, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, “I’m sure she had it coming.”

The reading for today is about finding a place where we can be fed and empowered so that we can live out what we are meant to be in faith, and therefore, our ability to bring about change and healing. It is about being vigilant with regard to the types of communities to which we belong; ever aware of their blessings but also much attuned to their destructive impact, and ever mindful of the “unlikely” places, people, and communities in our midst caught up in good purposes.

Like you, I am brought in contact with all kinds of people. I am often made aware of the actions of justice-seeking people full of passion and love outside of the church, and confronted all too-frequently with people whose first words out of their mouths are to profess their Christianity, but whose understanding of what that means is a depressing laundry list of legalisms and selective literalism that does nothing to widen the circle of care and love, and instead works to keep the neighborhood as it always was, and not the party place for everyone that it could be.

As a result, a lot of us find ourselves stuck in the middle, where we recoil from such verbal professions of faith because we don’t want to be painted with the same brush. We retreat into our heads, we protect ourselves, we don’t allow ourselves the vulnerability of speaking from our hearts.

This does a disservice to you and to all of creation. You have been sent with power! Remember your baptism. Remember that living water—the symbol that connects you.

Remember that you are a part of this universe.

Remember that you are a part of what we understand to be God.

You have been sent with power—

Remember that you are connected to this world, to this community, and linked in the power of love to be able to heal and transform.

Remember your baptism in this neighborhood we call the realm of God, and the chance you have to bring everyone to the parade. This particular neighborhood is a place where people have made room for each other across all divides.

God is still speaking, but sometimes we miss hearing God speaking to us because we fail to recognize the divine in the other. As theologian Paul Tillich said, “Without a soul open for it, no word from the Lord can be received.” *You have been sent with power* to make the circle of hearing and responding wider. You just have to find those places where you will be heard—prophet that you are, and shake the dust from your feet where you are made unwelcome. Communities reject their own, as well as outsiders, as many of us in this room know.

Someone once said that Justice is Love with legs. How might God be calling you to participate in your community to challenge it, extend it, work within it? Walk your walk in love—you have been sent with power.

Come to this table today in order to remember your baptism and get strength for the journey. You have been sent with power. This is an open table....wherever you are on your journey, you are welcome here.

Scripture for Sunday, July 5, 2009

Mark 6:1-13

1 He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. **2** On 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! **3** 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?” And they took offense at him. **4** Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” **5** And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. **6** And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. **7** He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. **8** He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; **9** but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. **10** He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. **11** 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.” **12** So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. **13** They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.