

July 8, 2012

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Ezekiel 2:1-5; Mark 6:1-13

All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

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There Has Been a Prophet Among Them

A prophet is someone who is right and early and is usually only recognized as a prophet in retrospect. You find prophets among teachers and parents, presidents and clergy, bankers and mechanics. Prophets are rarely religious these days because so many religious people of just about any faith are so invested in trying to make sure that nothing changes, that the traditions are observed and the practices maintained. Ezekiel was unusual in this respect. He was taken into captivity in Babylon with the first deportation into exile ordered by King Nebuchadnezzar II in 597 BC. He was 25 years old and it was five years later that he heard his call to prophecy. Like Jeremiah who had remained in Jerusalem he predicted the destruction of the Temple because of the infidelity of the people of Israel at home and in exile. Neither of these men was beloved in their time, but Jerusalem was finally sacked by the Babylonians after Ezekiel had been in exile for ten years. The people did not rush to thank him for his insight and wisdom.

Same story with Jesus. People in his own town took offense at him. He dared to be different, and those who might claim to know him best found him... found him what? Arrogant? Stand-offish? Presumptuous? When you stop to think about it, all these kinds of judgments say more about the judge than the judged. All such judgments that say Jesus didn't quite 'fit in' are saying that he declines to be 'like us', 'one of the gang'. It is as though he doesn't have good manners or good grammar. We are all subject to a powerful drive toward conformity, and people we perceive as outsiders or renegades are easy targets for anything from suspicion to blame. In fact if we don't conform we are likely to be rejected and no one likes that feeling, that reality of being rejected.

Jesus turns all this around and puts it on his head when he sends the twelve out two by two. He told them to travel light and if they were rejected, they were to turn the question back to those who would reject them. *"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."*

Here is how this works among us. You decide that you are going to make a change—any change—in some habit of yours.

- Your mother is driving you crazy and you decide to limit your calls and conversation to once a week.
- You decide that you are going to try being a vegetarian
- You have read all the magazines and books and you know that you will never really exercise until you place that as the most important thing in your schedule.

With me so far? Good. Here's what actually happens: Your mother is driving you crazy and you decide to limit your calls and conversation to once a week. Your mother complains to your sister that you never call. Your sister passes this on to you, telling you that you are selfish and that Mom really just wants a little attention. You hold your ground and Mom gets sick. What are you going to do?

You decide that you are going to try being a vegetarian. Your wife says 'that's nice honey, but then tends to 'forget' about that and invites people over for hamburgers. You spend the evening trying to make to with baked beans and slices of tomato while resenting having to justify your decision to your carnivorous friends. You wonder if it is really worth it (and of, course, whether your commitment includes forgoing bacon.) How long do you last?

You have read all the magazines and books and you know that you will never really exercise until you place that as the most important thing in your schedule. You decide that you are going to exercise after work every afternoon and within days you have been asked to take a late appointment. Your husband needs you to pick up the children because he has to go out of town, and you're not going to be able to get the workout in as well as get to the dry cleaners before they close. Plan B: the mornings. Use your imagination. You know where this is going. The systems of your life, the people you love, other things that have a prior claim on you conspire—or so it would seem—to sabotage your good intentions.

What Jesus did with his disciples is asked them, in effect to be confident in who they are and what they are doing. He wants them to act in the assurance that they are beloved of God and that such love is the source of their power—more than conformity, and more than belonging. He says that rather than feeling rejected and seeking to be loved, they should leave those who cannot or will not hear them behind for now and keep doing what they are called to do.

This is easier said than done of course. It sounds easy enough when I'm having fun in a sermon imagining these possibilities. But staying clear through the reactivity in the systems of our lives is no easy matter when we are told that we are being selfish, inconsiderate, never thinking of others, only thinking of ourselves. This kind of rejection is hard to take. Jesus could do few acts of power in the face of it. But his advice to his disciples and so to us is to get playful. The business of shaking the dust of your feet is an old Middle Eastern expression that was not taken literally as best scholars can tell. Jesus might have said "If they refuse to listen to you, gesticulate in a particularly unattractive fashion with one of your digits," or "if any place will not welcome you, escalate the disagreement and sue them for discrimination." But he didn't ask his disciples to get really serious. He asked them to move on without getting too bent out of shape. Imagine these bearers of the Word actually shaking their legs as if to get the dust off their feet. A prophet, or anyone who decides that change is necessary, must have the capacity to withstand the resistance to her or his message.

Ancient prophets were not understood only as people bearing a message—a word—they were thought to embody it in some way. When Jeremiah broke his pot, it was not merely exemplary—God is going to do something like this to us—it was understood to be bringing about that which was prophesied. All prophecy, if you like, is self-fulfilling. When any of us decide to make a change, develop a new habit or practice, respond to life in some new way for us, we must, in a sense, be the change. And one way to ensure that happens is to have fun in the face of resistance.

Mother, you've hurt your finger? I'd better move in and take care of you.
Hamburgers again? I could eat a horse.
The children are going to enjoy that five mile walk to school with me.
If they won't welcome you, shake the dust off. They will know what that means.

In a brief time of prayer imagine what changes you would like to make as you move into the fall.. What might be different this year? Ask God to help you have fun. Fun and Prophet. Not a bad way to go. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray....