

Sermon: Strangers to Ourselves

Year B, Proper 10

[Jeremiah 23:1-6](#); [Psalm 23](#); [Ephesians 2:11-22](#); [Mark 6:30-34, 53-56](#)

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For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. (Mark 6:31). I was writing today's sermon and I knew I had to start there. Because I am never so busy that I have no leisure even to eat.

Except that I was typing that at 2:30 in the afternoon, when I was hungry because I would not set aside my sermon preparation to stop for lunch. There are times when we are strangers to ourselves and then a barrier comes down and we see something we didn't see before.

In today's reading from Mark, the disciples are coming back from their first mission out into the world. Last week we heard how Jesus had sent them out, in pairs, to drive out demons and heal people. When they weren't accepted by the people they went to, they were to shake the dust from their feet at the people who denied the value of their teaching. In today's reading they are coming back. They're called apostles now, because apostles are people who have been sent out. So these former fisherman have been sent out to preach the coming of the Kingdom of God and now they are coming back.

What must they have looked like? They were men in their prime. Physically the work of walking from place to place and talking had to be easier than doing the work of manual laborers that they had been doing only a short time before. But mentally? Emotionally? Spiritually? Jesus had sent them out with only the clothes on their backs, no money, no bread, no bag to carry anything in. They had to go to places they had never been before and not only heal and drive out demons, but they had to ask for help, ask for the very basics of life, a place to sleep and food to eat. From strangers. What must they have looked like?

In my mind, they look like guys standing in front of a full U-Haul with a big house packed up. They're tired, worn, all sorts of decisions they don't normally have to make are behind them. They've done a kind of physical activity they're not used to, regardless of what they do in their regular life. But the job is not yet done, because all the boxes and furniture have to go to the new place. Like those imaginary movers, the disciples have learned something about the other apostle they have been paired up with as they talk about the coming of the Kingdom of God. But they have learned more about themselves. The unaccustomed work has caused a barrier to come down, and they have caught a glimpse of the stranger that they are to themselves. Jesus sees that look, the new knowledge, the barrier down and the stranger staring back at each of these disciples of his, and he suggests that they go to a deserted place, to a wilderness, and rest (Mark 6:31).

Here we are in a wilderness. Admittedly, it's not very wild. There's electricity and facilities. But it's open to the sky and to the water. There's something here that is not in our church building. But then there is something about setting aside an hour on a Sunday to come together. In today's world, going to church regularly is stepping into a deserted place. For many of us it is a place to rest and renew. For all the people we know who are coming and going and have no leisure even to eat (Mark 6:31) they have no idea how deserted and wild a place church is, how great a rest it offers. Maybe not so much for body, especially when we climb those stairs to the

sanctuary. But mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Hopefully it is a place where we can let some of the barriers down and take a peek on the other side.

[Pause]

But really, if Jesus wanted his disciples to rest, why not just stay where they were? Just being somewhere that they didn't have to beg for their evening's meal and their lodging had to be a break. If there are so many people needing healing, then if they worked together for a couple of hours, they could probably get everyone in the village taken care of and then sat down for a meal with a glass of wine. They could have talked together about the different towns they'd been in and commiserated about the woman who had the smelly feet, or the fleas in the rushes they slept on or the stubbornness of the old man who was in turns deaf and argumentative.

Instead, he gets them into a boat and out on the Sea of Galilee. These men who have been afloat their whole lives. This they know, they're experts. They are not strangers to themselves anymore. They know exactly what they are doing. The calluses on their hands are just exactly right again, where they had to feel so odd when they were healing the sick by anointing them with oil. In a way, the barriers that surrounded their old lives are back up. They can get some distance from their first real lesson in following Jesus. When you follow him, some very comfortable barriers come down and you become a bit of a stranger to yourself.

There are many things that the Roman Empire brought into the world. One of them was the idea that citizenship was separate from nationality. You could be a Greek but a Roman citizen. You could be an Israelite and be a Roman citizen. It was a bit trickier to be a Jew and be a Roman citizen, but once the Roman senate passed a law granting the Jews an exemption from the worship of the state gods in addition to the local ones, even someone like Paul could be a Roman citizen. So where you were born no longer determined what privileges you had.

Before the Roman Empire, you had to be born in the country that controlled the empire to have the best privileges.¹ You had to be Assyrian or Babylonian or Persian or Greek to get the perks. With Rome's ever increasing need to soldiers and grain, they created a framework, a set of rules and ways of enforcing those rules, across a huge geography and diversity of cultures that allowed privilege to transcend birthplace. The barriers were still there, of course. There were still insiders and outsiders. But they had introduced the idea that you could move from one side of the barrier to the other.

Think about a framework made by laws and customs. There are rules about which side of the road to drive on. Everyone follows them and driving is a much less anxious time than it might be. The frameworks that we live inside keep things familiar and predictable.² Part of why I've been urging different committee members to write down what we do here at the church is so we have a more robust collection of frameworks to support us so we can focus on what is new and different each time. We'll spend less time trying to remember what we did before, be able to more quickly decide what we want to do differently because we can see what we did before. If we let those frameworks constrain us, then we'll need to knock them down. But if they help us work together more readily, they'll be great foundations to build on.

¹ Benjamin Dunning, "Strangers and Aliens No Longer: Negotiating Identity and Difference in Ephesians 2." *Harvard Theological Review*, no. 1 (2006): 8.

² Karen Chakian, "Proper 11, Pastoral Perspective, Ephesians 2:11-22" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 258.

Paul comes into this strange more fluid world, where a barrier is not really a barrier. But Paul is saying not that you can get over the barrier, but that the barrier is gone. Think for a minute about when the Berlin Wall came down, or when apartheid ended in South Africa. The people dancing on top of the wall and in the townships. But peace doesn't come because the barrier came down. The hard work only began then. Germany had to become a country again, despite huge economic and social differences. South Africa is still trying to find a way to live together. Think of our own country. We are still trying to figure out how to live in a country where people don't get arrested for DWB, Driving While Black. You can take the barrier down. But peace doesn't automatically follow. Paul is saying that the differences are still there. You are still Jew or Gentile. But the barrier is gone. It's control over you and how it organizes your world is no more.³ Wonderful to be sure. But terrifying too because the framework is gone.

For the men in that boat on the Sea of Galilee, a framework is probably all they want. To rest means to be inside a barrier that holds them safe. They're looking forward to that wilderness, hanging out with each other. They've been sent out as followers of Jesus and they are back together. They've learned so much about what they don't know,⁴ perhaps Jesus is going to have one of those lessons where he explains everything and they'll get better at preaching this Kingdom of God thing.

So what must they feel as they head to shore and see all those people waiting for them? They just wanted one night, one lousy evening with their teacher, with each other, one night to rest inside a familiar framework of close friends and fellow students. They must have felt like this was how it was always going to be when they were with Jesus, people everywhere. All those people and all those people needing something from them. They weren't good enough, experienced enough. They were simply not enough and they were never going to rest.

Jesus looks at the same crowd and feels compassion. But surely he has compassion for his apostles. There are really two boat trips in this story, one towards the wilderness and one towards Gennesaret. During both those trips the disciples, the apostles, had to feel competent. And they come ashore to the mobs of people looking for healing and they have to sink back into those feelings of inadequacy.

What confidence Jesus had to have in them.⁵ He had to believe that no matter what they felt about themselves, he knew they could do it. They could share his teachings about the Way so that the teachings would continue on, across the world and across time.

The disciples do not understand what is happening to them. Barriers are moving around on them and they switch from being highly competent to completely inadequate. When they are feeling at their most inadequate, Jesus steps into the mobs and shows the disciples what to do. We may focus on the healing or the feeding of the five thousand, which is what is in the missing verses from today's reading. But what Jesus is showing them is how to feed and heal themselves in the midst of working for the kingdom. How to find what they need to live without the old barriers keeping them safe and protected. He's showing them a life where what they know how to do can help them recognize new skills for proclaiming the Kingdom of God. He's helping them realize

³ Dunning, 15.

⁴ Walter Wink, "The Education of the Apostles: Mark's View of Human Transformation." *Religious Education* 83, no. 2 (1988): 290.

⁵ Lamar Williamson, "Exposition of Mark 6:30-44." *Interpretation* 30, no. 2 (April 1976): 170.

that the foundation of their faith is laid on what they know. The foundation of their faith is based on their love and trust for one another and for him.

Jesus is helping them find a way to build that new structure that everyone is held by. Just as Paul said to the Ephesians, there is a foundation already laid for us to build upon, even if some of the moments come when we barely recognize ourselves, when we feel inadequate and not enough. In those moments when we feel most like strangers, most left outside the barriers that let the world make sense to us, we are building a holy temple in the Lord (Ephesians 2:21).

As William Long said, "When time merges into eternity, the only thing left of history will be this temple that God has built, the church of Jesus Christ, the people in whom God dwells."⁶

⁶ William R. Long, "Ephesians 2:11-22." *Interpretation* 45, no. 3 (1991): 283.