

Providence Presbyterian Church

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Mark 1: 29-39 – “Remembering Those of the Neighboring Towns”

Our faith practices, at their best, are designed to do two things for us. When I say faith practices, I mean prayer, worship, reading the scriptures, participating in the sacraments, fellowship. These practices do two things for us, they comfort us and center us on the one hand, and they constantly unsettle us and call us to move and grow on the other hand.

As a comfort, our patterns and our liturgy and our assurances are meant to remind us of God’s unconditional love, to keep us rooted in our faith and its promises. Our rhythms keep us centered and in contact with others. They remind us that we are forgiven in grace and loved as we are. These are things we need to hear. They make us feel settled and at home. But our practices, the scriptures, and our liturgy are also meant to continually unsettle us, *recenter* us, and *re-orient* us around Christ and grace that changes the way we act and live in the world. For example, the moment we identify and settle into who our neighbors, friends, and enemies are, Christ starts messing with our categories. These impulses to comfort us and to unsettle us sometimes feel in tension with one another. And in our gospel reading, these dueling impulses seem present. The disciples are called to leave their nets, but these early stories all happen right along their lake village with the smell of fish still in their noses.

I was in Capernaum on my one trip to Israel. We visited the synagogue site. What strikes me, therefore, is that the very nets that Jesus invites Peter and Andrew, and James and John to leave so that they can fish for people, are not more than a couple hundred yards from the synagogue where Jesus enters and casts out a demon that we read about last week. And all this not far from Peter’s house that Jesus enters in our story this morning. So while these first disciples are called to leave what one knows and to follow, the call doesn’t take them very far at first. They are still in the world of the known and comfortable. They do not have to venture far, and those who benefit are those of their own small village.

Jesus casts out a demon in their synagogue, as we talked last week, attending to what lies beneath the skin and bringing to light the forces at work in their very midst. They then go home to Peter’s house to find Peter’s mother-in-law sick with a fever and in bed. And Jesus raises her up, heals her. And by

this point, the social dynamics of small village life are in full swing. Everybody knows what has happened; the rumors have circulated. They wait out the Sabbath, for one is not supposed to do any work, to lift anything on the Sabbath, which ends at sundown. But as the last sliver of the sun disappears over the horizon, they come from all directions, arriving at Peter's house. They come flocking out of their homes, carrying on mats, or helping along on crutch or cane, every sick family member, those suffering everything from a broken bone to tooth gone bad, eczema to anxiety disorder, a tumor to a hairy mole, paralysis to paranoia.

“That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.”

As surprising and stirring as these events must have been for the people of Capernaum, they must also have been comforting, reviving the local community, getting help for the needs of their people. I wonder if they hoped that Jesus would stay, that he might teach them, minister to them, train and disciple their children. I can see the elders of the town conferencing in the corner as to how to hire this guy. The finance committee is feeling optimistic of what this might do to the budget shortfall. Jesus has brought change certainly. But the benefits are comforting, and it is reviving their little village culture and community.

We are not told how late into the night this all went. But it is hard to get to sleep with such excitement. To have your sick rebound, lame walk again, and those barred from synagogue or temple now clean and able to enter those doors once again. Those plagued by one possession or another, now free and sitting in their right minds.

It was quite late when the village settled down, and so the sound of oxen hooves on the basalt stones come a little slow; the sound of cooking pots is just now being heard in the morning light. Peter sits up to realize that Jesus' spot is empty. He jumps to his feet, his mother-in-law, too, is confused; they discuss together where he might be. I'll check the synagogue, he says. At that point, the others have arisen also and are engaged in the question of Jesus' whereabouts. As they head to the synagogue, they brush past a flow of people heading to Peter's house to pick up where they left off the night before, looking for the healer.

While the search for Jesus begins to build down in the village streets, Jesus sits amidst an olive grove, up on the hillside overlooking the sea, watching the sun climb the eastern sky. For it is in the quiet and stillness when we sometimes remember who we are; where we gain perspective and clarity, something like what Wendell Berry expresses in his poem. That clarity and calm that washes over one in such a moment and space.

But they find him eventually. When they found him, they said to him, *“Everyone is searching for you!”*

Now I wonder, if Peter and the others found you in a quiet moment and declared that everyone is searching for you, what would your emotional response be? Is it one of burden, feeling the weight of others’ needs, like having to answer the phone or help a kid before you can even finish your coffee? Or do you pep right up, feeling that they want me and need me and there are practical things I can do? And off you go. Or do you wonder why, question whether their expectations are well placed, or worry that they will turn on you when you can’t come through? Maybe something else altogether.

Jesus’ moment of solitude and quandary is swallowed up by the urgent, by expectations and hopes and needs. And I wonder if Jesus is tempted to honor their hopes and to stay there in Capernaum. I mean, things are going well. Would it not be alluring to stay where you are valued, where you have meaningful work to do, where you have people who will take care of you?

But [Jesus] answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. You see what Jesus gains in that time of solitude was not just calm and a sense of peace, like Wendell Berry’s poem expresses well, but a sense of clarity, a sense of the unsettling call to keep moving. The call to not just settle into the comfortable, but to keep reaching, keep growing, and keep thinking about others’ needs.

I wonder if the people of Capernaum were disappointed to hear this. Did they try to talk him into staying? Did they see Capernaum becoming a center of Jesus’ ministry, their synagogue growing into a type of mega-gogue? I wonder what it felt like to them when Jesus said he was taking these men of the village, Simon and Peter, and James and John, and they were going on to other villages. On one hand, the change in so many peoples’ lives and

demeanors must have lingered on the air. And yet, the hopes and energy slowly dissipated back into daily rhythms. To support Jesus taking the good news farther meant certain things for them too that must have triggered a whole set of feelings.

I have been thinking lately about our place in this pandemic year, certainly as I am trying to get to know you all and trying to find some kind of rhythm. I have been thinking about these unsatisfying patterns we are in and the disruptions to how we want to do things or how we used to do things. And I have thought that it might be good to contemplate in this time that this is often how change feels. It's a little unsatisfying. There is disruption. Disruption of hopes, disruption because we don't all think or experience things the same. We often don't care for the change. We'd rather either go back or forward. It is often done outside of our control, or if in our control, change is done for the interests of someone else, not ourselves.

The neighboring towns. The people and the needs beyond the horizon of one's everyday life and thinking. The needs, the opportunities, the anxieties and fears of others whose journey might be made easier or fuller if they too were to meet the Christ, if they too were to be touched. It is the moment when we realize that to follow sometimes calls us to lift our eyes beyond the world we are entrenched in, to step beyond the comfortable, the routine, the parochial. It is that unsettling and re-orienting aspect of our tradition.

Often in times of stress, we feel this instinct to pull back, to go back to something we know and that is more familiar, and we obscure all the problems and challenges that we had back there. We do it in the church, we do it in culture and in politics. It is that impulse to trust the familiar, to trust that which doesn't push us out to the edge, to the new and uncomfortable. It is an instinct to seek one's own interests first. To help others only if it too helps us.

But let us go also to the neighboring towns, Jesus says. Let us conceive of the needs over the hill, in the next town, in the next region. This is a different impulse, I believe. It is one where you have much to offer, but little by way of control. It means you are accountable, but not in power. It means we are called to follow Christ in faith and trust. That is true for the disciples who go, and for the village people who stay. It is a change, a call for all of them.

As we come to the table of the Lord in a few minutes, we celebrate once again the Christ, who did not seek comfort or the familiar, but sought us. The Christ who had the vision for our needs and our redemption. The Christ who, in the words of the hymn in the letter to the Philippians,

though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited, (or grasped and held)  
7 but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
8 he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

There is something central about the gospel, about Jesus' ministry, that is realized in the going out, in that perpetual realization that others need to hear, that others need this grace, and forgiveness, and wholeness and possibility. So much so, that the moment it stops going out, something changes. The moment we stop seeking, the moment we hunker down too hard, we change something about the church.

For Jesus, in the quiet of the sunrise, despite his own temptations to settle for the stable and to respond to the urgent, he knows that God has still more for him to do. How do we participate in that always going out gospel, follow the call to leave the nets, and not stop only a few hundred yards away?

As the new pastor of Providence, I am slowly getting to know you, and sometimes you are telling me stories of Providence's past because you want me to get to know you and where you are have been. And you are telling me about your hopes and concerns for Providence's future. And this is all normal, and there would be a lot more of it I suspect if not for a pandemic. But the pandemic has brought its own questions and limitations, and frustrations, and we are more anxious to both get back and move forward. It is a confusing time to sort out. I feel it. Maybe you do too. This makes me think that as a church family, how important for us to be in prayer. How important for us to go out to the Olive grove in the quiet of the day and to seek the clarity and calm that might help us not just manage the stress, but to hear God's voice, and to know where God is moving us, pushing, calling us.

## Psalm 84

### *The Joy of Worship in the Temple*

- To the leader: according to The Gittith. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.
- 1 How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O LORD of hosts!
  - 2 My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God.
  - 3 Even the sparrow finds a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may lay her young,  
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,  
my King and my God.
  - 4 Happy are those who live in your house,  
ever singing your praise. *Selah*
  - 5 Happy are those whose strength is in you,  
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
  - 6 As they go through the valley of Baca  
they make it a place of springs;  
the early rain also covers it with pools.
  - 7 They go from strength to strength;  
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.
  - 8 O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;  
give ear, O God of Jacob! *Selah*
  - 9 Behold our shield, O God;  
look on the face of your anointed.
  - 10 For a day in your courts is better  
than a thousand elsewhere.  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than live in the tents of wickedness.
  - 11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield;  
he bestows favor and honor.  
No good thing does the LORD withhold  
from those who walk uprightly.
  - 12 O LORD of hosts,  
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

### *Jesus Heals Many at Simon's House*

*(Mt. 8:14–17; Lk 4:38–41)*

<sup>29</sup> As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. <sup>30</sup> Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. <sup>31</sup> He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

<sup>32</sup> That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. <sup>33</sup> And the whole city was gathered around the door. <sup>34</sup> And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

### *A Preaching Tour in Galilee*

*(Mt 4:23–25; Lk 4:42–44)*

<sup>35</sup> In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. <sup>36</sup> And Simon and his companions hunted for him. <sup>37</sup> When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." <sup>38</sup> He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." <sup>39</sup> And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.