

DISCIPLES: FRINGE ON THE CLOAK  
II Samuel 7: 1-14a; Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56  
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost • July 21, 2024  
by Pat Berger

Before our reading for today from the Gospel according to Mark, we would read about Jesus sending the disciples out, two by two. You will remember that they weren't to take anything extra with them – rather, they were to depend on hospitality being offered by those they encountered as they went. In today's reading, they had returned. Now, Mark called them “apostles,” the Greek word for “the ones who have been sent out.”

In our reading, the “sent out” ones have all gathered around Jesus, excited to tell him about all that they have seen and done. There are a couple of things for us to pay attention to as we read. First of all: there is no immediately! Depending on the version of the Bible from which you are reading, the word “immediately” appears about 17 times in Mark's Gospel, but not here. And we are accustomed to more details from Mark about these missions than we most often get from the other gospel writers; here we have: they told Jesus what they had seen and done. Period. What had they seen? What had they done? We aren't told.

Well, Jesus wasn't your typical CEO; he wasn't a numbers cruncher, and the bottom line – how many of this and how much of that – wasn't his main interest. The disciples, the apostles, had been out on their own, and they had come back. What apparently was important to Jesus was that these men had been out working for the Kingdom; now they needed renewal. Rest and food had to be at the top of the list. Think about the number of times that we read about Jesus doing his day's work, and going away by himself for prayer and rest. Clearly, that is the model he would like for his disciples to follow, too.

So they all got into a boat and went to a deserted place, which, by the time they arrived, was no longer a deserted place at all. People from all the surrounding areas had come; there was a large crowd.

Jesus felt compassion, and began to teach – not to heal or to hold the babies; this time he began to teach. And then he fed them – that, however, is a story for another day; go home and read on in Mark. On this day, Jesus and his disciples got into the boat again, crossing this time to Gennesaret, and again they were met by crowds of people, many of them ill or bringing someone who was ill – people who just knew that if they could get close enough to Jesus even to touch the fringe of his cloak that they would be healed. And again, we aren't told in this reading what Jesus did. We are told that those who touched the fringe on his cloak were healed, and that is all we are told here.

Perhaps that is just as well for us, the disciples who are apostles – the ones sent out – today. Brian Stoffregen writes,

We, who continue the apostolic mission, need to do and teach in our time and places. How do we make use of the authority Jesus has given us 'over unclean spirits?' We can't simply repeat what the original disciples said and did. We need to discover how we can best spread the gospel in our time and place with our words and deeds.

In its own way, I think that is what God had Nathan say to David in our verses from Second Samuel for today, too. David was having a bit of a rest from enemy attacks and had some time to think. And what he thought was that he would like to build a house for God. David had a house, after all; ought not God have one, too? He told that to Nathan, who basically said, go for it. At which point God basically said, hold on here. I haven't lived in a house, God said, since the people Israel came out of Egypt, and it's worked out just fine. God would take care of God's people, and God would take care of where they ought to live and where God would live; God would be a father to David, and David would be a son to God. David had been chosen to be like a shepherd to God's people, and that would be enough of a job for him. David ought to do what God had given him to do, and God would take care of the rest of it.

The shepherd's job was to care for his sheep. At that time, it was pretty easy to tell if the one caring for the sheep was their owner or if he was working for someone, tending someone else's sheep. Hired shepherds didn't always care whether the sheep slept in a safe enclosure, or had enough good food to eat, or if there were clean, still water for them to drink. Someone who owned his sheep would be attentive to all of that; that is the kind of shepherd that David was to be to his people. He could only do that, of course, if he weren't chasing around trying to do things for people that could be done by others.

What we are called to do for the Kingdom benefits from that same attitude. There is no Christianity without people to proclaim the Good News. And, there is no Christianity without our responding to God's call to us to be the ones sent out, to be God's love, to be like the fringe on that cloak, that healed simply because it was close enough to Jesus. We have not been called just to affirm the work of the early followers, although certainly that is a part of it. Can we have the same impact that that fringe had: can we be close enough to Jesus that the needs of those around us can be eased simply because we loved and we were there? Yes, we can. And: like those first disciples, we need also to take care of ourselves. We need rest and refreshment.

How about the time that you spend being a disciple? We need to be cautious when we use our energy for the Kingdom, in order that we indeed serve as faithful disciples, as the fringe on Jesus' cloak, the fringe that helps and heals and holds and teaches. Our call includes self-care, and we deny that at great peril. As David Lose wrote this week, Jesus " . . . also responds to [our] needs; Christ calls only after Christ sees, attends to, and heals us, and that Christ is already out in front of us; as we leave and go forth we will find him in the very needs of those we serve."

Let us pray.