

5th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9B Melinda J. Wagner

Ezekiel 2:1-5

First Immanuel Lutheran Church

Psalms 123

Portland, Oregon

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

July 5, 2009

Mark 6:1-13

Sue Bender has written about encountering the sacred within everyday situations. She tells about a time when her 34-year-old son Michael came home to live for about a month, while he was doing some continuing education. Michael hadn't shared a home with his parents for many years, but it wasn't long before old patterns got triggered and familiar conflicts flared between mother and son. Both of them felt like they'd put their foot into an unseen trap and ended up playing out old, destructive scripts they'd rather leave behind. But they didn't know how to change.

Two days after Michael arrived, Sue found herself fleeing to a coffee shop with an ache in the pit of her stomach. She didn't completely understand these old dynamics that kept entrapping them, but she wanted to try a new way. To listen more. To try to set aside her expectations and meet her grown-up son on his terms, instead of her own. At the same time, Michael made his own resolve to begin again. And over time, they found a way.

Instead of forcing the heart-to-heart talks Sue imagined they ought to have, she let Michael take the lead and discovered he'd rather stretch out on the bed with the TV on, have some light conversation, and show her photos of his trip to the national park. Instead of making elaborate dinners, they tried out some inexpensive Chinese restaurants. Sue tried to listen without judgment, which was hard for her. Michael made the shift to be less defensive, more easygoing. It turned out to be a sacred and transforming time, and when the month was over, everyone was sorry to say goodbye. (Sue Bender, *Everyday Sacred: A Woman's Journey Home*, Harper San Francisco, 1995)

It takes some doing to set aside old patterns and scripts that don't give life. It means identifying those knee-jerk reactions that are part of a less mature way, and moving beyond them to patterns that are more loving, whole, and healthy.

Even Jesus sometimes found himself caught up in old patterns and scripts that needed to be set aside. In today's reading he traveled to his home town after performing spectacular miracles all over the countryside, only to find that back home his efforts fell flat. Even worse, when he spoke in the synagogue, people took offense. Their cultural expectations made it impossible for them to accept Jesus' new leadership and message. The social conventions dictated that nobody in the town was allowed to rise above their natural station in life. If anyone pretended to, it reflected badly on the honor of everyone else. So it became impossible for these

friends and neighbors to ever see Jesus as anything more than Mary's oldest boy. Their old scripts and patterns left no room for God to work.

Notice how Jesus responded. He didn't get mad or defensive. He just calmly described the situation: "Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town." Then he moved on. He didn't have to argue the point, because Jesus didn't need anyone else's approval, not even the approval of these people he knew and loved. He knew who he was in relationship with God, and that's what mattered.

When Jesus sent the twelve disciples out to teach and heal, he warned them that old patterns and expectations could trip them up too. He told them what to do when a town rejected their message. Not to get angry (the way James and John did when they asked Jesus to call down fire from heaven on a town that rejected him!) but in a solemn ceremony wipe their feet clean of all dust and erase any trace of that town. It was a symbolic way of saying: We're all done here. We aren't going to be carrying *you* with us any more. So we hereby leave all traces of your old, life-killing scripts behind, and instead we take up a new pattern of life. We choose to be doing what Jesus does. Letting people know that God is on the move. Healing people in God's name. Speaking and acting as representatives of Christ. We know who God would have us be, and that's what matters.

I do find it fascinating to consider Jesus having a family of brothers and sisters. We don't know much more about them beyond the names in our reading, and the fact that Jesus' brother James became a prominent Christian leader after the resurrection. But it's interesting to consider Jesus dealing with some of the same confusing family dynamics and expectations we ourselves deal with. It brings home to me how much our Savior was *fully human* as well as divine. And how well he knows the situations all of us face.

And it makes me marvel again at the way God sees fit to entrust God's mission to such extremely human people as the 12 disciples, and us. Isn't that amazing? That God would risk giving God's crucial work to us, knowing our old, human, destructive patterns? But still God makes us part of God's unending project to make this earth new. God gives us the same task the 12 had, to let people know God is alive and real and to be God's healing presence, Christ's own representatives.

And God provides very well for us, as God did for them. God claims us, God forgives us, and God sets us free. When we know that we are God's beloved children— that we are treasured, supported, forgiven, empowered-- then we don't have to stay trapped in old patterns that leave us stuck, scared, and focused on ourselves and our needs and our fears. And we don't have to be defined any more by what other people think, because we know who we are in God's eyes.

The reality is, not everyone will respect our faith convictions or our way of life. There will always be people who see a love-directed lifestyle as weak or naïve or impractical. Or too countercultural to take seriously. Or even too dangerous or radical – something that needs to be stamped out. People will push back against us in all kinds of ways and for all kinds of reasons, trying to force us back into old patterns. But we don't have to shrink back.

Instead, God makes it possible for us to act out a new pattern of confidence and compassion. To be clear in who we are and what we are about. To be freed up and creative and hopeful, because Christ loves and values us. God gives us talents and abilities to use for the common good. God gives us the authority to say no to evil and destruction in whatever form it appears. God gives us the freedom to travel light and not worry about filling our pockets but instead focus on serving others. God gives us a measure of Christ's own sympathy for hurting people – so we can listen well and see others compassionately and not be bound by the self, by "me and mine".

And when we run into struggles, like St. Paul's pain and suffering, or the prophet Ezekiel when people wouldn't listen, or like Jesus being rejected by those he loved and trusted... When we experience trouble, we will find that God is here with us, to encourage and to heal. And even out of the painful times in our lives, God's presence will bring a depth of compassion and a steadiness of resolve that can give us the strength to endure.

God isn't looking for perfection from us. Instead, God is embracing us broken, fallible human beings and lifting us to higher things. God is forgiving us and helping us start over, again and again, in the Spirit of Christ who died and rose again.

And like the mother and son who, out of love, took time to step back from their stuck relationship and try on new ways of being together --- we have the freedom in Christ to try on new ways of being alive with others and God's creation. Ways that better reflect Christ's forgiveness and mercy and goodness, ways that lead us toward a lifestyle of generosity and healing for the earth and everyone and everything upon it.

My hunch is that our mission will begin very close to home. Kind of the way it did for Jesus. And Jesus will lead us outward from there, in trust and love, until everyone, everywhere, will learn how precious they are to God.

Amen.