

"It Just Might Change Everything"
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St. Paul's UCC Church
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Mark 6:1-13

He [Jesus] left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 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." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

God is here, at work, at St. Paul's. Can you feel it? God is here, and just might be calling us out of our comfort zones.

It can feel exciting. And, it can feel scary. When God starts to call us, all sorts of questions might start to swirl: What if we're not able to do the thing God is calling us towards? What if we don't succeed? What will happen to our church if we *do* succeed? Who will we be? When God summons us out of ourselves, suddenly, we start to feel a little uncomfortable. Suddenly, we start to feel a little vulnerable.

Jesus and his disciples probably felt that way, too. Today we read from chapter 6 of the Gospel according to Mark, and I sense a lot of discomfort and vulnerability in this story.

We begin with Jesus, back in his old stomping grounds – his hometown of Nazareth. He's returned after some pretty hefty healing (for example, bringing a little girl back to life); now he's home, and he makes his way to the synagogue to do a little teaching. And you'd think his old chums would be excited to see him, right? Well, not so much. Turns out they're not too thrilled about their old friend Jesus. When he starts teaching, they are all a-flutter: "Where did he get this? What is this wisdom that he's touting? Isn't he just a carpenter, Mary's son?" We don't know what Jesus is saying, but

whatever it is, it sure ruffles the feathers of everyone in the synagogue. The people he grew up with are offended and insulted, “Who does he think he is??”

Jesus is making himself completely vulnerable here. In going back to his hometown, in trying to show his old friends who he’s become, in trying to demonstrate his wisdom, he’s risking a lot: his reputation, his family, his life, even. He’s making himself so vulnerable. And it doesn’t end well for him – not here, not later.

We move on to the second part of the story, where the focus shifts to Jesus’ twelve disciples. Jesus sends them out, two by two, to go to the neighboring towns to heal and preach and cast out unclean spirits. But it’s this next detail that really gets me: Jesus orders his disciples to take *nothing with them*, nothing except a staff, a tunic, and sandals. Nothing else – no extra clothing, no food, no bag, no money. Can you imagine? With just the shirts on their backs, the disciples are sent to complete strangers’ houses to do their work and ministry.

I don’t know about you, but that would make me *extremely* uncomfortable... to be that vulnerable, I mean. The disciples are being sent out, and they don’t have a penny to their names. So to survive, they’re going to have to, as Blanche Dubois from a *Streetcar Named Desire* puts it, “depend on the kindness of strangers.”¹ These twelve disciples are only going to survive by asking for help: asking for food, clothing, a place to lay their heads at night. But that puts them in quite a bind. What if the strangers say no to the disciples? What if they kick them out? What if try to harm them? Being that vulnerable would be really, really hard.

And besides, isn’t this vulnerability thing just a load of hooey? Don’t we live in a dog-eat-dog world? Aren’t we supposed to have thick skin? Aren’t we taught to never let them see us cry? Well, no, as it turns out. Not if we want to be like Jesus.

Unlike the way he is sometimes portrayed – muscles bulging, eyes on fire – Jesus wasn’t a super-hero, tough as nails, perfectly impenetrable in every way. He was human. He was completely human, and so he was completely vulnerable. He suffered when those around him suffered. He had compassion for widows, orphans, enemies. He wept. He loved. He felt pain. And at the end, he died a criminal’s death on the hard wood of a Roman cross. And in knowing this Jesus, we know that we worship a God who risks everything to come and be flesh among us, to live, love, and die as one of us.

And isn’t that what vulnerability is, at its core? Risk? Yes, we worship a risk-taking, power-overthrowing, game-changing God of all hope and of all possibility. We worship a vulnerable God, a God who chooses to come down and to be God among us. A God who risks humiliation and rejection to be God with and for us. We worship a vulnerable God.

No wonder Jesus and his disciples take such risks. No wonder Jesus preachers what he knows to be true, even to those who will question him, and ultimately reject him. No wonder Jesus’ disciples take nothing with them on their journey. No wonder they ask for help. No wonder they are instructed to depend only upon the hospitality and kindness of strangers. Jesus and his disciples understand something about the God

¹ Paraphrasing from Tennessee William’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (published by Signet, a division of Penguin Putman, Inc., Middlesex, England), 1947).

they serve. Though they were, no doubt, uncomfortable on their journey, still, they allowed themselves to be vulnerable. Because they knew that God does the same.

And we, too, are called to the same.

I know, I know: it's not the most enticing invitation: to come be vulnerable, like Jesus, like God. I get it. But let me make one more plug: the God we worship is also a God of paradoxes. Our God is the God of the ultimate paradox, really: of life overcoming death. So, even when things feel really, really hard; even when you feel more like you are living in death than in life, remember: in death, there is life. Life wins.

As we take risks here at St. Paul's, we will most assuredly find ourselves stepping out of our comfort zones. And yes, what we try might not work; yes, we might look like fools; and yes, we will be utterly vulnerable. But when we risk it in the name of the one who risks it all for us, there will be new life in our midst.

God is here, church. God is at work. God is giving us a vision. And it might be difficult at times because, well, I think we're going to have to be a little uncomfortable, a little vulnerable, with each other. We may need to ask for help; and we may need to ask someone for help we've never asked before. We may need to say, "I don't know" more than once. We may need to let go of old notions of the way things are done around here. We may need to pray. A lot, and very specifically. It will be hard at times, and uncomfortable – being vulnerable like this.

And it might just change everything.

Thanks be to God.