

“Receiving God”

July 7, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Mark 6: 1-13

PRAYER

O Lord, take my lips and speak through them;
Take our minds and think through them;
Take our hearts and set them on fire
with love for you and your people. Amen.

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When the new life comes walking toward us up the dusty road... will we open our gates?

It's a question that runs through every chapter of the gospel of Mark. Will Jesus be welcomed in this moment, or will he be rejected?

Will he be recognized or misunderstood?

Will the person he is encountering hear and take in what he has to say, will they reach out for the healing he offers, will they recognize the presence of God when it's right in front of them... or will they get angry, turn away, or try to silence him?

Mark's gospel is full of stories of resistance and incomprehension in the presence of Jesus. WE know – because Mark has told us back in chapter 1 – that Jesus is the bearer of the Holy Spirit. We witnessed it descending on him at his baptism, and heard the voice of God say, “This is my child, my beloved.”

But would we have recognized that for ourselves if Mark hadn't straight up told us?

In Mark's gospel, lots of people don't. As Jesus comes preaching and teaching, feeding and healing, some are drawn to him, but others aren't. There's story after story of anger, rejection, and incomprehension. The reaction in Nazareth is typical: “Where did this man get all this?”

“And they took offense at him.”

The irony in Mark is that the ones who are the least able to see, hear, or accept Jesus are often those closest to him. His immediate family; his neighbors and kinfolk; and yes, even many of his followers. People like us.

It's those at the very edges of the crowd – the outsiders, the marginalized, the ignored, the scandalous; even non-Jews – who are able to see Jesus for who he really is, and who will violate any social taboo, break through any barrier, to get close to him.

The woman with the flow of blood. The friends who take apart a roof to lower a paralyzed man for healing. The Syro-Phoenician woman clamoring for attention. The blind beggar at the side of the road. Meanwhile the religious experts mistake the presence of the Spirit for demonic possession. His mother and his siblings think he has lost his mind. His neighbors and kinfolk – well, their view of him can perhaps be summed up in four little words found in our passage today. “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?”

In Jewish custom, “the son of” would usually be followed by the name of the person’s father. But in Mark’s narrative Jesus’ father doesn’t seem to be in the picture. Mark hasn’t read the gospel of Luke or the gospel of Matthew: They hadn’t been written yet. He doesn’t know anything about angels or shepherds or a miraculous star. The story he got wind of is one that a different kind of biographer might try to hush up: Jesus was the child of a single mother from Nazareth. Like so many of the characters who are drawn to him in this very surprising gospel, he must make his way through the world without name, honor, or status.

Was the story true? We’ll never know. Each gospel understands Jesus’ origins differently. What matters is that Mark chose to be honest about what was being whispered, and to weave it into his larger narrative about who Jesus was and is.

I think that means it’s okay for me to be honest about my own awkward, messy life.

So, Jesus’ close family, his neighbors and kinfolk, and the religious authorities are all deeply skeptical about his ministry. But at least his disciples believe in him, right?

Well... sort of. They follow him, but they don’t really understand him, not yet. Their stubborn incomprehension often leaves Jesus weary and exasperated.

But he goes on steadfastly teaching them anyway. And today’s passage finds him training them to go out and bring the gospel message to the towns and villages of Galilee. Never mind that they haven’t really been able to take that message in themselves. He’s making these blockheads his gospel ambassadors.

“Take nothing for the journey except a staff,” he tells them. “No bread, no bag, no money – just a pair of sandals and the clothes on your back.”

I imagine them entering each village hungry, dusty, empty-handed... bearing only the good news of God’s grace and love. At the mercy of strangers. Not knowing whether those they meet will be hospitable or hostile.

No weapons, Jesus says. No money. No cash, credit cards, or Apple Pay. Not even a change of clothes. No protection. No judicial immunity.

Isn’t this how God comes to us in Jesus? Isn’t this the way God chooses to enter our world? Simply drawing near to us, and waiting to see how we will receive God’s gift of self? Always offered, never compelled...

...approaching the mystery that is each one of us with openness and invitation; extending grace, extending new life, again and again and again... even in the face of resistance, incomprehension, and rejection.

Jesus wants the disciples’ way of entering a town to embody the message of grace they have come to share. They are to walk the talk, to practice what they preach... becoming the gospel in their own bodies by living it.

He’s not waiting for them to become better disciples first. Nor is he waiting for the world to become a safer place. The world was scary, troubled, and confusing then, and it’s scary, troubled, and confusing now. And it’s still our world to love and care for –

vulnerably, honestly, face to face, as guests passing through; encountering sometimes welcome, sometimes hostility.

And when it’s our turn to respond the stranger at our gates?

The migrant at the southern border, the homeless neighbor in the park, the opioid user, the man returning from incarceration, the woman living with mental health challenges...

Will we put up barbed wire, pass anti-camping laws, compel these uncomfortable strangers to move on?

Will we meet them with openness and hospitality, or hostility and rejection?

Every person we meet – even those closest to us – is a stranger and a profound mystery.

Every encounter is practice for laying down our defenses so that we can receive God’s gift of self in Jesus, the stranger waiting at our gates.

Today he offers himself to us in bread and cup.

The invitation is before us... to come forward, empty-handed (except for our bulletins, of course!) so that we can reach out to take him in.

Hostilities surrendered, conflicts reconciled before the gates of his all-inclusive love, we gather as we are, forgiving and forgiving, around his table of peace.

Come, and be welcome.