Karen Hollis

Sermon – Mark 6:1-13

July 8, 2018

I reconnected with my friend, Simon, about 6 years ago. I was interning at a little house church on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula and he had just moved to a nearby town. This little community I was serving had fully embraced him; their souls were deeply moved by his music and their hearts were stirred by his words. They told me he would be there, so when I arrived to lead worship one Saturday afternoon, I was overjoyed, but not shocked to be welcomed by his big smile, lovely Scottish accent and warm embrace. Simon was newly divorced at the time and heard God say “Go . . . across the ocean to the Olympic Peninsula . . . there is life waiting for you in the process of learning to make boats by hand . . . minister to those you meet with the light of Christ that shines in you . . . you don’t need to bring much with you, for I will provide for you.” With CD’s for sale, a guitar always under his arm, and a huge heart for Christ, he made his way through that season of life, always fed, always able to pay rent, and always welcomed with open arms to offer a heartfelt message for Christ.

Simon and I met on the Isle of Iona in 2007 when I was leading the youth portion of a pilgrimage from my church in Seattle. Simon’s wife at the time was the warden of Iona and Simon was officially the gardener, but was more importantly worship leader, spiritual leader and fellow pilgrim. Simon led the healing service at the Abbey that week; he had chairs set up in a circle, which people would occupy until hands were laid on them, a prayer said over them, and then we would offer the chair to another. Simon and 2 other leaders moved clockwise on the inside of the circle, laying hands on people until everyone had received prayer. I sat down on a chair in the dimly lit Abbey, together with 60 other pilgrims; Simon approached me, put both hands on the top of my head, hands from behind me appeared on my shoulders and back, and Simon led them, saying, “Spirit of the Living God, present with us now, enter you, body, mind and spirit, and heal you of all that harms you, in Jesus’ name, Amen.”

The Abbey on Iona has been a place of hospitality over the ages. When a group arrives on Iona, the warden greets them, sits down with them and offers tea and biscuits, hears about their journey and shares about what the pilgrims can expect during their stay. Hospitality in the Celtic church is of the utmost importance. If the Abbot or Abbess of a monastery asks to be undisturbed, those monitoring the front door would still be expected to notify them if a visitor appeared . . . the Abbess will want to personally welcome anyone who arrives. Hospitality comes before everything else, because every visitor is Christ.

Jesus didn’t always receive this kind of hospitality as he traveled from community to community; in some places, like his hometown, he even struck a nerve. Who does he think he is? It’s like making chit chat with Jesus at your high school reunion, “you’ve been away a long time; what are you doing now?” and being completely unprepared for the answer. Maybe the listener finds themself fidgeting with their hors d'oeuvres or glancing around the room for someone, anyone else to talk with, or simply turning and walking away, unable to engage the conversation. Perhaps they feel a twinge of jealousy, a tad inadequate, or project on him sense of judgement that they are not enough. Because they watched Jesus grow up, they have more doubts than most about his message. How could someone from here do what he’s doing; it just doesn’t compute. Jesus seems frustrated; he can’t get through to them, he can’t access the power of God in him, and he is amazed at their unbelief. In his hometown, with his community, Jesus is confronted with the fullness of his humanity. It’s hard to go home sometimes, especially when we have grown and changed so much. How does one convey that in a 15 min conversation? There is so much left unsaid, so many judgements made, and a precious few are willing to go deeper to try and understand. This is the reality of Jesus’ message: for a variety of reasons, some people won’t hear it. Yet we’re all hungry for it, and Jesus spent the last 3 years of his life sharing the kingdom message and training others to do the same.

After his experience in Nazareth, Jesus gathers the 12 and starts sending them out in pairs to put into practice what they had been learning. His rejection at Nazareth still fresh, his human feelings still hurt, Jesus encourages them to not spend energy on the places that are not receptive, but dust off their sandals in rejection and move on. I imagine for the disciples, learning how to rely on God and community for the things you need would be just as challenging as evangelizing and practicing healing. So how to prepare? They throw on their one tunic, tie their sandals, pick up their staff . . . what else to bring? He said take nothing . . . but what he really meant was to depend on God and the hospitality of strangers to care for our physical needs, and carry with us the learning and wisdom we have learned from Jesus. Jesus told parables to teach about the Kingdom of God . . . we could teach in parables. We’ve sat hour after hour under his teaching . . . we know the lessons. The joy of knowing God’s Kingdom shines through us like a flame . . . we can’t help but wear it on our faces. All of this is available to us, but encouraging all to repent and see the Kingdom of God is our task. We know the moment(s) of our own conversion, the moment we saw the world in a new way. Isn’t *that* what people want to know? How has this message of Christ changed our lives? Sharing those stories from a place of authenticity would certainly kindle some hearts. Sharing from personal experience grounds the message in human life and gives an example of one way the Kingdom has had an impact . . . one way it has transformed life . . . one way it could happen for them.

As Jesus blesses each pair to go, he gives them authority over unclean spirits. I’ve so accepted the reality of Jesus’ authority that I’ve forgotten that this was at one time shocking. Over the last few weeks we’ve heard people in the scriptures responding to Jesus’ miracles with gasps. Who is this man who even the storms obey? By whose authority can he bring a girl back to life? Who is this man with the authority of God? And again this morning some wonder, how can he give that authority to others? He can give it because he was given it; this authority lives in Jesus, but is to be shared with those who come in faith to serve.

This is the total First Century package: a heart on fire to serve, a personal message to share, authority over unclean spirits, and relying on God and the hospitality of strangers to care for our needs. Here in the post-modern world, things look a bit different. We’ve all heard a knock at the door to find people eager to share the Good News or walked by a street corner evangelist. Those tend to be less effective and more off-putting. Something more organic is in order . . . simply allowing the light in us to shine toward those we meet and with whom we spend time. I heard of a minister once who put up a sign that said “Service Entrance” above the exit to the sanctuary, visually reminding the congregation that at the end of every worship service we are commissioned to cross that threshold and serve in the world.

Our light shines in personal sharing, it’s something Simon has always been good at; it doesn’t have to be elaborate, in fact just standing confidently in our own skin, allowing the light within to be seen and speaking authentically from our own experience is all it takes to share the message of Christ. What that person does with the story in their own lives doesn’t change the story we have to share, because it is ours and it is true. It is not the job of the disciple to change minds or convert people; only the work of God can transform someone. It is only our job to serve, to share, to shine, and to be companions on the path.