

Mark 6:1-13 Pentecost 6 7.1.21 Pastor Bill Uetricht

I think most of you know that we Lutheran preacher types don't choose our Biblical readings for preaching. They are given to us through what is known as the lectionary. It is a three-year cycle of readings. I am amused sometimes by what the lectionary provides us to reflect on, the ironic character of the readings particularly in light of special national or cultural days. I remember one Father's Day being given a text in which Jesus calls his disciples to hate their families. Wow! That's helpful!

Well, today, this weekend, when we are highlighting our nation, the hometown, if you will, the book of Ezekiel talks about the hometown folks as being a rebellious house, an impudent (disrespectful) and stubborn bunch. And Jesus in Mark today says that prophets (spokespersons for God) are not without honor "except in their hometown, among their own kin, and in their own house." The homeland, in other words, is a problem!

Great words for the Fourth of July weekend! Great thoughts when the expectation for today might be reflections on how wonderful it is to be who we are, how great America, the homeland, is.

Now truthfully, faithful patriotism can be a very good thing. It is good to be taken in by the wonder of the spacious skies, the amber waves of grain, the majestic purple mountains. For us, the homeland is remarkably beautiful. What a gift our geography is! Regularly, I feel phenomenally proud of and grateful for the earth I get to walk on, the lakes I get to see and breathe in regularly.

I, too, generally, feel pride for the people I get to connect to. The hometown folks often are remarkable. Oh, to be honest, there have been times when I have wondered whether we all live in the same town, the same nation. Sometimes some folks seem like strangers in

my land, but still, the folks of the homeland are *my* people. They are the folks I get to do life with. Of course, I love them.

Yet Jesus' experience and his teachings, and the experience and teachings of other prophets that have gone before him, like Ezekiel, warn us about the limitations of the homeland and family.

Just this past week, I received an invitation to a family reunion of folks from my Dad's side. Truthfully, apart from a funeral here or there, I haven't spent time with most of these folks for decades. I decided it was time to do so. In a few weeks, we will gather with them, and I am looking forward to that time. I must admit, though, that the headline of the invitation to this event caused me to wince a bit, understanding, nonetheless, that no one meant anything harmful by it. The headline read: "Family is Everything." Really? Practically, that has not been true for me. I/we moved away from family. We created a community away from family, even if we still value it.

Not only practically, but theologically, the banner of the invitation unsettled me. Everything? Family is everything. This is not Jesus' concern, but that seems like a real recipe for failure to me. What happens when the family doesn't produce what you think it should? What happens when the family is deeply disappointing? If it is everything, is life not life because your dream for family is gone? Family is obviously important, but everything?

Jesus doesn't think so. His movement is bigger than the family, larger than the homeland. Sadly, his experience is that the homeland and the family don't know what to do with him. He starts teaching in the home church, the synagogue in Nazareth, and initially, the hometown folks are wowed by him. But before you know it, they are scandalized by him. Quickly they move from "wow, this hometown boy is really something, he's got so much wisdom" to "this guy offends us."

It seems that they take offense at him once they begin reflecting on how ordinary he is, how much like us he is. Is not this the carpenter, they ask? Now for me, that would be a great compliment. But it wasn't in Biblical days. Carpenters were at the bottom of the social heap in Jesus' time.

And then they say, "Is he not the son of *Mary*?" Most folks were known as the sons of their fathers. Perhaps they are now questioning the legitimacy of his parentage. Maybe they are saying that this guy was born in shame. Whatever they are saying, now they are ticked off at him. Why should this guy be speaking big truths to us? He's too common. He's too ordinary. His pedigree is lacking.

I remember when I first became a pastor. My sister wanted to receive from me our church newsletters. As she read them, she really got perturbed with me. I was the pastor, and I was speaking somewhat authoritative words, and she thought I was a bit bold. "You're Billy, my brother, my young brother, the one we all picked on. What right do you have in saying such strong and bold things?" And she took offense at me. Truthfully, I am not sure she ever got over that. I remained a challenge for her, I suspect, until she died, in part because she couldn't wrap her head around my speaking boldly and prophetically.

Sometimes when people are too close to us, too much like us, we have a hard time hearing them. The wisdom that comes from the proverb "prophets are not without honor except in their own hometown" is true. It's difficult enough to listen to prophets at all, but when the prophets are like us and from the hometown, we especially struggle to integrate their message. Sometimes I think this is part of the battle between parents and their teenage and young adult children. Often young adults become a bit prophetic as they are educated and enter the world of adulthood. Parents are not so certain about the

words of challenge that come from the kids whose diapers they changed, whose bad behavior they remember.

We need the prophets, though. We need the folks from the hometown and from far-off places that speak the truth to us, even if that truth is hard to digest or even if the truth they speak isn't fully true but rather suggestive of ways that we need to be changed. We as Americans must grasp this. How quickly we reject the prophets among us, those locally grown and those who come from afar. But their tough word, their prophetic critique is not the threat we make it out to be.

Please, please, please, don't go down the path of saying, "You don't like it here; then go someplace else." That's how some of the hometown folks dealt with Jesus. They, in cooperation with the big, bossy, yet insecure government known as Rome, sent him off to another place, called by the book of Hebrews, "outside the gate." Jesus, the prophet who so integrated the ways of God, whose movement was fundamentally about the heart of God, was put outside of the city to make sure that the threat of love that he provided was removed from the hometown as well as the whole nation. He was crucified because the true prophets of God offend too many of us.

It's interesting to note what the book of Ezekiel says about Ezekiel's call to be a prophet. After the wind of God moves within Ezekiel and puts him on his feet, establishes him for his work, he is told that his calling is to a rebellious and stubborn group. Ezekiel is not to begin his work with naïve assumptions. The people he is going to face are tough. Yet Ezekiel is encouraged to know that his work is not necessarily about producing results. What he is supposed to do is to say, "Thus says the Lord." His work isn't about his opinions; it's about the heart and mind of God. Whether the people hear or refuse to hear his message is not the issue. He's not responsible for the results.

“Whether they listen or don’t listen, they will know, [nonetheless,] that there is a prophet among them.”

And to have a prophet among them is to know that God is among them, the God who is not apathetic, the God who loves so much that he continues to speak. Worse than words of critique are no words spoken at all. The presence of the prophets, the true prophets of God, those prophets captured by the love and compassion of God, is a sign that God deeply cares.

Don’t resist the prophets in your own lives, whether they be your teenage kids, your spouses, your pastors, your enemies, your true friends. We need the folks who will say to us, “Hey, in case you don’t know it, you have food on your face.”

America, don’t run from the prophets. We need the people who will say, “There are things that aren’t right, that aren’t in keeping with the love, compassion, and justice of God.” We need the truth tellers, the folks who speak that truth from a far distance and those who live right next door to us. What we don’t need is apathy, folks who don’t care. What we do need is people who love us enough to call us to be what we truly can be.