

SUMMER

SERMON SERIES - 2021

July 4, 2021

Pentecost 6

Mark 6:1-13

Bishop Larry Kochendorfer **Synod of Alberta and the Territories**

Welcome to this summer sermon series that our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is providing for congregations. I am Larry Kochendorfer and I serve as the Bishop of the Synod of Alberta and the Territories. It is great to be with you this Sunday and to be able to give your dear pastor or deacon and lay leaders some much welcomed relief. Our rostered and lay leaders have been offering an incredible ministry over the course of the past year. But it's hard work and we need to do everything we can to give them our encouragement and support!

As I prepared today's sermon, I want to acknowledge my appreciation for the writings of Karoline Lewis, Bradley Schmeling and Barbara Brown Taylor and, the preaching resource, *Feasting on the Word*. I have significantly borrowed their wisdom and insights, and their words, in the shaping of today's sermon.

Let us pray: (Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Additional Prayers – Commitment. ©2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Augsburg Fortress, p. 86.)

Into your hands, almighty God, we place ourselves: our minds to know you, our hearts to love you, our wills to serve you, for we are yours.

Into your hands, incarnate Savior, we place ourselves: receive us and draw us after you, that we may follow your steps; abide in us and enliven us by the power of your indwelling.

Into your hands, O hovering Spirit, we place ourselves: take us and fashion us after your image; let your comfort strengthen, your grace renew, and your fire cleanse us, soul and body, in life

and in death, in this world of shadows and in your changeless world of light eternal, now and forever. Amen.

When our family moved to Edmonton, Alberta in 2002 I recall getting stuck in a traffic circle near our home and the congregation to which I had been called. This was a traffic circle with five entrances, and of course, five exits, and I would get stuck in the inside lane, going round and around, passing my exit several times.

Our minds can be like that. Or, at least, mine can. I can get stuck in a loop. I revisit conversations in my mind wishing that I had said something different, or at least in a different way, practicing in my head what I wished I had said.

I revisit arguments, and I make my case, point by point to my invisible and absent antagonist. Sometimes I just stew, usually over something ridiculous. Or, lately, I seem fixated on a theme: politics, or COVID, or details for our son's wedding service which took place recently.

At times, my mind is like a dog with a bone. I can hardly let go.

I suspect that some of you may understand. There are times, even during a ZOOM meeting, that I see a participant's lips moving I check to see if the individual is unmuted. Sometimes their lips are moving even though nothing is being said. And sometimes there's just a look in someone's eyes on ZOOM and I know that something is going on; that something is going round and around in their mind.

There's huge energy in stewing. It is circular energy. It moves round and round, with no exit ramp. No entrance ramp for anyone else, either. Just round and round.

I wonder if this kind of circular energy gives us a way of considering the two brief stories that appear as our gospel text for today.

In the first, Jesus comes home and on the sabbath preaches in the synagogue. What strikes me is not that the people are upset about his preaching. People have always gotten upset about preaching. What surprises me is that, as a result, Jesus is not able to do any deeds of power – except for the few sick people that he laid his hands on and healed. Something happens in that synagogue that keeps the energy of God's reign – already drawing near – from getting in. There is no entrance ramp. Even Jesus is shocked at its strength.

The gospel writer does not actually tell us what Jesus said in his sermon. He only tells us their reaction to the message. The energy in the synagogue turns – they were astounded, and they

become critical. Their comments turn to insults. Jesus is mentioned as “son of Mary,” a strange construction in the first century when the father would have been mentioned.

Are they saying something about this “fatherless” child? This illegitimate voice? And they say that he is nothing but a carpenter. We hear “carpenter” as a skilled and prized trade. However, the actual meaning here is more like, “manual laborer.” Who does this illegitimate, laborer think he is? He was familiar to them. They knew him as the eldest child of a large clan, a child like their own children, none of whom was traipsing around the countryside cleansing lepers and casting out demons. Who does he think he is?

I suspect that all of these comments and more, you know how it happens, were made at the coffee hour. You can almost picture the crowd turning from Jesus toward one another, whispering in each other’s ears, their communal connection closing off this outside influence.

As a community, they draw the circle closer, their connection becomes a kind of centripetal force pulling them harder and tighter together.

Is it any wonder that a community that uses insecurity and anxiety and suspicion as its connection is impervious to the reign of God? It is no wonder that Jesus cannot break through. It is no wonder that this community cannot experience deeds of liberating power. It has closed itself off.

This is a warning to any community of faith that it should evaluate what it is that connects the community. Is it this kind of narcissistic energy, always turned inward? Does it spin so strongly round and around that there are no longer any entrance ramps for new voices, new energy, new ideas? No exits ramps to get away from the fear and anger? Is it a closed system, unopen to change, to possibility, to opportunity, facing only inside the circle?

This happens so easily in communities because almost by nature we use our deep insecurity or our prejudice, our anxiety and suspicion to keep connected. As church we will even couch it all in God language.

We want to belong, but we organize around judgment of the other – the stranger, the enemy, the wounded, the voiceless. We create a community that looks and sounds just like we do. God help the prophet who comes to announce a different perspective!

You can see this in churches that become rigid and hardened theologically; no questions allowed. You see this in politics where there is only win or lose. You see this in family systems that assign members to particular roles that are not allowed to change. You see this in congregations that are organized around the past or one personality or a particular cultural expression. It happens in just about every community.

In the second brief story in today's gospel we see what is instructive for us through Jesus' reaction. He is amazed by the power of their unbelief. He is amazed at how it can stop even the grace of God.

And, instead of stewing, or arguing his case, or justifying his perspective, or just getting stuck in the traffic circle, he moves on to another village. He sends the disciples out two by two to find places that will come alive with a new Spirit. Strap on your sandals, take your staff, and find the households that are open to you. Find the places, the communities, where connections are open and wide and welcoming of the message, places where the circle of the people will welcome this new way of love, compassion, healing, and justice to enter.

And, when you are rejected, pick yourself back up, dust yourself off, and move on. Do not do what everyone else does: fight about it or stand your ground or prove that you are right or just lay in bed terrified of being terrified. This is the grace of Jesus' action here: deep within his own being is love, compassion, healing, and justice, and he moves on.

The crucifixion is symbol of the world stuck in this loop – this circle. Organized around fear, it marshals the weapons of power to kill the messenger; to demean the opponent; to silence the prophet. It is terrified of forgiveness and weakness, scared to death of losing, and it cannot trust vulnerability, love, or compassion.

And here is the good news for us today: Easter is God's answer to the loop – to the circle. Jesus suddenly appears on the inside of the locked doors; on the other side of our walls; inside our circles.

Easter life provides a way out, even as it lets the new voice in. Instead of limits, this Easter life is one of possibility and of opportunity. This Easter life enriches deeds of healing and peacemaking. This Easter life brings people together. This Easter life spins the circle toward openness, where each of us find, and our faith communities find ourselves turning outward to the world with a kind of grace and generosity that is truly prophetic, and truly good news for all.

The Spirit of Jesus leads us, pulls us together, makes us a new community, and then sends us out two by two, three by three into the neighborhood where the love of God is already flowing, where God's presence is known in the eyes of the other – the stranger, the enemy, the wounded, the voiceless. Where we too will discover that Jesus is enough. That the good news is sufficient. That God's love and forgiveness is enough. That the Word and the water of baptism is enough. That the meal of bread and wine, Christ's own body and blood, is enough.

Where the circle of our lives spins toward openness, and we find ourselves turning to the world with a kind of grace and generosity that is truly prophetic, and truly good news for all.

May it be so among us.

Prayer: (adapted from The Rev. Susan R. Briehl. Day 1, April 30, 2000.)

*Come to us, risen Lord Jesus,
and grant us faith enough to share the good news.*

*Send us, filled with the breath of your Holy Spirit,
To breathe peace into fearful lives,
To love one another as we have been loved,
To welcome the stranger and make friends of enemies,
To forgive the sins that bind others to the past,
To serve, on bended knee, all in need of care;
To be your wounded and risen Body in the world
And to enter with joy God's in-breaking, startling future. Amen*

Resources used in the shaping of today's sermon:

[Barbara Brown Taylor, Bread of Angels, "Sapping God's Strength." © 1997 Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley Publications.](#)

Evangelical Lutheran Worship. ©2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Augsburg Fortress.

[Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3 Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors. ©2009 Westminster John Knox Press.](#)

The Rev. Anthony Robinson, "Buying the Ticket," July 8, 2012. [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20031aa/buying the ticket](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20031aa/buying_the_ticket)

The Rev. Bradley E. Schmeling, July 8, 2018. The 7th Sunday after Pentecost. <https://www.gloriadeistpaul.org/mediacast/7th-sunday-after-pentecost-pastor-bradley-e-schmeling/>

The Rev. Erik Parker, "Why Churches Need to Stop Being Good Hosts," July 5, 2015. <https://millennialpastor.ca/2015/07/05/why-churches-need-to-stop-being-good-hosts/>

The Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis. "Rejection." July 1, 2018. Dear Working Preacher. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/rejection>