

“A Lofty Location”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

July 4, 2021 – Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Mark 6:1-13

Today is the Fourth of July, and on this wonderful day of celebration, you may be gathering with friends or family to enjoy the holiday. Some of you are joining us remotely today (or sometime later) because you are traveling and are unable to be with us in person. For the holiday, I imagine that some of you may be or may be going *back home*, whatever *back home* means for you. This could be the place where you live now, or the place where you grew up (which may be the same), or some other place where you've experienced life with your family. And if your day includes a visit back home to a place from which you've moved away, you will likely be going on an emotional journey today. Hopefully, that journey is more good than bad.

Today's gospel story is of Jesus going on his own emotional journey back home. He had been on the road (and sea) for some time as he traveled all around the regions surrounding the Sea of Galilee, proclaiming that the Realm of God was at hand and performing miraculous signs that demonstrated the reality of God's powerful presence in him, including healing many who had suffered from incurable illnesses and even raising the dead. All the while, as he traveled with his disciples, who witnessed him time and again demonstrating God's awesome power, those closest to him remained totally clueless about his identity and remained without faith.

We read in our gospel lesson just a few weeks ago that those even closer to him than his disciples, his own family, also were without faith, thinking that Jesus had gone out of his mind. So as Jesus headed back home to Nazareth, where his yet unbelieving family remained, after teaching, healing, and performing amazing miracles in other lands, I imagine he was feeling plenty of emotions. Perhaps he was joyous to be coming home to see those he loved and missed, but, at the same time, dreaded the thought of being back in the presence of those same loved ones as they thought he was totally insane.

Today's reading tells us that Jesus went back home, going to the synagogue of his hometown, and there took the lofty role of teacher. Those gathered in the synagogue, who, in this tiny rural village of only a couple hundred souls, would all have been familiar friends and family, were astounded by his wise teaching and amazing acts. However, to them, Jesus was not a great teacher, healer, or miracle worker, but just the local woodworker. The gospel tells us they were *offended* by the power of God working through him, and so they hurled insults at him to knock him back down to earth, reminding him that he was just their humble country carpenter, a townie as they were, and the son of Mary (that he was not identified by them as the son of Joseph, as would have been customary, was also a deliberate dig). While back home, the social location of Jesus was not so lofty at all, but lowly, and that's the way it would remain as long as he remained among them, and so he had to move on as he was no longer just a woodworking townie from Nazareth, but the one whose mighty word stilled storms, healed hurting masses, and lifted the dead to life. He had a loftier location and had to claim it by shaking the dust off of his feet and moving on.

The second part of our gospel reading tells us that Jesus delegated authority and power to his still-learning disciples, sending them out two by two to continue his good work of teaching and healing. In commissioning these former fishermen, Jesus lifted them to a loftier social location, and instructed them to move on from a place, whenever they were not respected as agents of God's power, but belittled or rejected, just as Jesus moved on after being belittled in Nazareth. Like Jesus, they were to shake the dust off their feet and move on.

Dear friends, we who are followers of Christ also follow in the footsteps of those first dozen disciples. Like them, we are delegates of Jesus, sent out into the world to proclaim the good message of God's life-lifting love. Like the first disciples, we have been given this lofty location, and as we are filled with the Spirit of one who called the universe into being and keeps it in ever-expanding motion, we are empowered to continue Christ's work of lifting the lowly to higher places. Remember this whenever you find yourself feeling lowly, whether this is because of your own frailty, because others try to convince you that you are insignificant, or because your message of God's love for all is rejected--as was the case so often for Jesus, his disciples, and many other prophets since their time. Remember, you

are chosen by God, just as you are, even if you have but little faith, to do God's amazing work. Claim your lofty location, shake off any dust, and move on! Amen.