

Sermon 7 July 2024

Mark 6.1-13

The Rev. Mel Schlachter

Decades ago at a time I came back to Nebraska for a visit there was a clan picnic (my Dad had six siblings and I had 22 cousins). Since I was the ordained one in the crowd someone asked me to lead a simple worship on Sunday. This was Gospel the scripture I chose.

In those days I saw myself as an outsider in someways—politically (the Vietnam war was on), geographically (we lived in New York City), and trying hard not to let the past farm dirt between my toes show to this

group who was still half farm folk. In a defensive flip, I half enjoyed the position of outlier, of familiar stranger.

One of my aunts thanked me for the scripture. She had spent no little effort in making her way out of Nebraska to California.

Of course all this shows my ego-driven error. When we interpret scripture and identify with Jesus, 95% we've got it backwards.

The folks in Nazareth no doubt heard of Jesus' activity and renown. He had been gone a long time with his healing and teaching, and likely before that living around his mentor John the Baptist. So when The Man and his twelve member motorcycle gang roar into town, they offer him a special seat and duty in the

synagogue for Sabbath service. Then things come apart.

They are astounded by his wisdom, by his reputation as a healer, by his holy presence. And yet “he is Joe’s boy and Mary’s boy and some of his sibs are sitting here right now. What is going on?” They have a very difficult choice to make—whether to accept that God is manifest in one of their own, or take refuge in the security of the familiar familial. Can you blame them? Wanting to keep intact the relationships and tradition of a village now under Roman pressure.

The question remains for us--Can we see, feel, hear God’s presence in the familiar, right next to us even in crisis?

My late sister Ellie worked as a nurse and raised kids for 25 years before going to

seminary and being ordained priest. Early on she wondered if I thought she was really called to be a priest, or just following along behind me. I admitted to initial skepticism, but hearing her story of a call long deferred and seeing her in action took care of any doubts. The Holy Spirit worked through her in a different way, and I had to get to know a person in some ways new to me. Does it take someone else to see the Spirit's messing around in your sibling, your spouse, kids or neighbor?

There is a tragic, touching letter in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland addressed to a Miami probation supervisor from one Rear Admiral G.S. Morrison, about the admiral's son Jim whom you know from The Doors. Apparently Jim got arrested for

something and the supervisor was looking for personal background.

Said admiral Dad, "Since [he graduated college and I was posted in England for two years], he has been completely independent of me financially and in every other way...." He goes on, "While in London I was called by an old friend in California who had been approached by Jim for a loan to finance his first record. Concerned by his appearance particularly his long hair, the friend called me, I, in turn, wrote Jim a letter severely criticizing his behavior and strongly advised him to give up any idea of singing or any connection with a music group because of what I considered a complete lack of talent in this direction. His reluctance to

communicate with me again is to me quite understandable.”

Mr. Morrison concludes, sadly, “I will always follow his progress with the greatest of interest and concern and stand ready to assist him in any way, should he ask.”

Jim Morrison died in 1971, George Stephen in 2009.

*Riders on the Storm* indeed!

I have been moved by this letter for a long time, and I suppose partly because it rings such a familiar bell in so many of us and way beyond. For example, there has been a priest in NYC who gathers very at risk homeless gay and trans kids who have been thrown out of their houses when that part of their identity has become known to parents. As if to say, “That kid is not us,

born in the wrong family, has a defect, our family can't take this."

Maybe it can't. Our state legislature said the same thing in its recent session. Now preserving family, culture, tradition can be precious and needs its defenders. I think of our Indigenous peoples. Yet we also know when it is brittle or repressive and unthinking, even murderous. Do we send some immigrants back to the gangs from which they fled?

St. Mark says, "And [Jesus] could do no deed of power there." Is that surprising? Do we think that God and heavenly agents can run right over obstacles? God as bulldozer, or Genghis Khan? One seminary professor put it this way, "Jesus' powerlessness is not primarily about him

but about *us*, about those who are unwilling to believe the great things God can do.” .....yes, and awe at times for those close to us.

Maybe that is why many of us go away from home, kindred and friends to have important growth experiences—on retreat, in therapy, at a conference, in a Bible study group. It can be easier with strangers or alternate familiars who hasten to affirm you.

Faith can mean bringing yourself back around to that tradition, that family, that clan, that legislator, and having an honest wrestle and good listening too. This is so you can see God’s hand working in them too, Christ’s hands healing and offering new life perhaps through you.



Then watch out. Remember the second half of the story, when belief grows strong, Jesus sends out his gang on awesome missions--without their Harley's. They don't need anything but him. We as well, my friends, we as well.