

## Great Deeds of Power

The Rev. Melanie J. Weiner

July 8, 2018

Ezekiel 2:1-7

Mark 6: 1-13

Sometimes I open to the lectionary texts and I read them and I just say “uh oh.” Did I just read that? How are you all going to hear these texts? Will there be that collective gasp of concern when you hear them for the first time on Sunday morning after I have wrestled with them all week? Let me tell you a story that may help...

That passage from Ezekiel calls the house of Israel rebellious at least five times along with stubborn and impudent not to mention talk of transgressions. God warns Ezekiel about briars and thorns and scorpions. Scary stuff.

But let me tell you a bit about me as a parent. I prefer that my children, now all young adults, be rebellious and stubborn and impudent than secretive and sneaky. While I could have lived without some of their transgressions, there is a certain honesty in saying what one believes and what one wants and when one doesn't like something. Give me a child any day who says “I don't want to do the dishes!” rather than one who says “Yes, mom” politely and then I get home from a long day to a kitchen full of dirty dishes.

BTW either way they are going to do the dishes. The only difference is when the job gets done and how we are all going to feel about it.

Also don't forget that in that great tale of the triumph of good over evil, Star Wars, the Rebel Alliance are the good side.

Now, let's hear what happens when Jesus asks the synagogue in Nazareth to do the dishes...

Mark 6:1-13

<sup>6</sup>He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. <sup>2</sup>On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! <sup>3</sup>Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not

without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.”<sup>5</sup> And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.<sup>6</sup> And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching.<sup>7</sup> He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.<sup>8</sup> He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts;<sup>9</sup> but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.<sup>10</sup> He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.<sup>11</sup> If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”<sup>12</sup> So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.<sup>13</sup> They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

This gospel often comes across as stark, even brutal. The author of Mark believes that the parousia, the arrival of the reign of God, is coming in the lifetime of those living when he was writing. Everything in this gospel is urgent, events happen immediately, just then, right away. People hurry and scurry wherever they go. Mark has no time for niceties, for Matthew and Luke’s kinder, gentler way of telling Jesus’ story, with the edges smoothed out and made easier to hear. Mark’s narrative is short and to the point. IT is literally short -- 11,304 words in Greek including a longer ending added later, perhaps to make the abrupt ending more palatable. Matthew and Luke are substantially longer with 18,345 and 19,482 words respectively, and they record these events a bit more gently.

Let’s talk a bit about this rejection of Jesus, because it requires some explanation. The society in which Jesus lived, and also the society in which Ezekiel and the other prophets preached, was steeped in honor and shame. Who you were in that society depended on the honor or shame of your family, your location, your own actions, and how people perceived all of that.

So Jesus arrives in Nazareth having traveled all about the region casting out demons, healing the sick, teaching and preaching in the synagogues, bringing not one, but two little girls back from the dead. He has so many people following him that he has to get on a boat to avoid being crushed while he preaches. So I would imagine those deeds of power would accord him great honor, wouldn’t you? If he returned to his backwater hometown now I would hope that he would be greeted as a hero, with a parade and an honored seat at the synagogue and an invitation to speak at city council and shake hands with the mayor.

But not then. You see honor and shame then were a zero-sum game. In order for one person’s honor to increase, someone else’s or many others’ shame had to increase, you know, to balance things out. So when Jesus entered his hometown synagogue and the people were astounded at

his radical teachings, they didn't take it as well as the congregations had at Capernaum and other places in the Galilee. But they didn't argue with his words. No, they tried to remind him of his place by naming his family, his former profession. They name him as son of Mary, a fatherless child of a single mother, at least at the time of his birth. They call him the carpenter, which was not the skilled trade then that it is now. It was more like a handyman, someone who came to fix whatever was broken, the less expensive alternative to skilled artisans. Once they applied these shameful names to him, they could ask rhetorical questions doubting his wisdom and all that they had heard of his healing and teaching. And in tearing him down, they could feel that they still had honor and he still had shame. You see, they were protecting their sense of who they were at his expense. Building themselves up by tearing him down.

The unfortunate result was that he could do no deeds of power in Nazareth with a few exceptions. I wonder, and I have no evidence for this, if those he could lay his hands on and heal were not in the synagogue that sabbath day or were the ones on the periphery, people who carried shame themselves and either didn't hear or didn't internalize the message that Jesus was no one. I believe that we are complicit in our own salvation, our own spiritual healing. Jesus says over and over to people, "Your faith has made you well." His deeds of power, both those before Nazareth and those to come were possible because the people wanted them, believed in their possibility, and were open to receiving them.

So when Jesus charges the disciples, as Pastor Chris charged our service trip team today, they are sent to do great deeds of power, and they are very successful. They, simple men, fishermen and tax collectors, and people they met along their way, cast out demons and healed people. They could do this because they believed in God's healing power and so did the people they healed.

We are not to be bystanders, passively accepting grace and salvation. We are called to be like the multitudes of people following Jesus. We are called to be disciples ourselves, to be active partners, complicit with God and with one another in bringing about our own salvation, our own healing, that of other people, and working with people of faith around the world, the healing of our world.

Now I have used the word salvation a lot of times, and it's a word that has baggage. Many people have taken it to mean getting into heaven instead of hell. Perhaps you were taught that as a child. But salvation is from the same root as salve. It is about healing. The Greek word translated as salvation in the Bible carries connotations of physical health and safety as well as spiritual wellness. When I use it, I mean just that -- physical and spiritual wellness. So we are called to be active partners in the attaining and maintaining of our own and others' physical and spiritual wellness.

So what is our role as a church? As the big-c Church, the whole of Christianity?

Jesus gives us the hint of a cautionary tale here. After his surprise at the unbelief of the people of Nazareth, his own townfolk, Jesus gives the disciples their instructions for how to go forward. And did you notice that he didn't say, "Whenever you enter a synagogue...?" No... he said whenever you enter a house. Jesus ministry and that of his followers was not primarily in synagogues or in the Temple in Jerusalem. They met with people in their homes and in the streets and in the marketplaces. They drove out demons and healed people in houses or out in public.

The structures of organized religion were not keeping up with the new ways of God and of people. In fact, they were standing in the way of God's work in the world. They were tolerating, even working with the Roman empire to maintain what power and authority they had even as they watched the empire oppress their people. They were themselves oppressing their own people. So it was time for something new.

It is important to remember that Jesus never mentions starting a new religion. Jesus is a reformer, bringing the people back, or maybe forward, to the ways of God. It seems that every few centuries, some say about every 500 years, organized religion needs a reformation. We see it in ancient times in the words of the prophets 500-700 years before Jesus lived. We see it in the words and deeds of Jesus and his disciples. We see it again in the fall of the Roman empire, in the Great Schism, and in the Protestant Reformation, which by the way celebrated its 500th anniversary last fall...

Phyllis Tickle proposed several years ago that Christianity is undergoing substantial change, a time she named "The Great Emergence." Do you wonder what is emerging? Another theologian describes the every 500 year radical shift as the periodic rummage sale of the church, when we examine everything that we have and decide what is good and worthwhile and what has reached the time for bidding farewell.

Now I would argue that there is no need to shake the dust off our sandals and leave the church entirely, and I don't argue that solely out of self-preservation. There is much that is good in the church today that we may keep and celebrate and move forward with, but there are old ways that could be left behind. Ways that hold us back from living God's call to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:25-37); to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

Discernment of what to keep and what to let go is of course always the reformation challenge. But here are some questions that I think might help:

In our gospel passage today, was the synagogue encouraging or inhibiting God's work in the world? Well, that's an easy one because Jesus tells us the answer. The rest are not as easy but more worthwhile to consider:

In what ways is the Church (the big-c church, the sum of Christianity around the world) encouraging the work of God in our lives and the lives of others and in what ways is the Church inhibiting the work of God?

In what ways is our church, Foothills Congregational Church, UCC, a church whose birth was in courageous people leaving a church at least in part because of that church becoming too dogmatic, encouraging the work of God and in what ways are we inhibiting that work?

In what ways am I as an individual encouraging the work of God and in what ways am I inhibiting that work?

Answers to these questions are much harder to find because our stories are much more complex and nuanced than the highly simplified black-and-white story that we hear about the one synagogue in Nazareth. But asking the questions, particularly at this point in our society is very, very important.

Because those questions lead us to the next questions. What is the emerging role of this church in our community? What demons will we cast out? What people will be healed by our words and our actions?

Will we be complicit with God, actively engaged in the health and wellbeing of the people within these walls and the people in the communities around us?

Do we dare do great deeds of power?