

## "Just As He Was"

Those of you present in worship this morning, are you sitting in your usual place? We light heartedly say we can take attendance on Sundays by looking around the room to note if you are in your "assigned" seats. This reminds me of a Sunday morning in a congregation I served years ago. My mother came to visit for the weekend and joined us for worship that Sunday. She sat down in the sanctuary waiting for the service to begin when an older gentleman who attended every week walked up and said, "Excuse me, mam, you are sitting in my seat." Needless to say the gentleman had yet to fully embrace the idea of radical hospitality. Fortunately, this happened to my mother and not someone who was visiting or looking for a new church home. Oh, my. I sit in the same seat each Sunday morning, too. My name's not on that chair but everyone knows that's my place. All of this is to say we are creatures of habit, we human beings, and when we lay claim to a comfortable and familiar space we tend to be territorial about it. Here's the thing. We not only do this with our physical space but sometimes we become territorial in our mindsets, too. There are comfortable and familiar ways of thinking, you know, and when that happens we can be slow to allow ourselves to be moved. We refer to these familiar attitudes or circles of influence as being in our "comfort zone" and we know how challenging it can be should anyone try to push or pull us out of our assumed positions. So, we claim our territory and I think this is a way to understand the conflicts that surround the political and social divisions of our time. Whether it be the present issue of immigration or the long suffering debates within the larger church about judgements regarding human sexuality, just to name a couple of examples, we lay stake to our position and fiercely guard our territory. It all takes on a deeper importance when we recognize that our faith experience can fall into this same kind of territorial thinking. This is a challenge for us. The mission Jesus brought to the territory of Galilee was not for the purpose of leaving those who followed him where they were. Jesus was constantly on the move and to answer his call to share life with him was to accept a willingness to be led to new places. When Jesus first called his disciples to drop their nets and follow him he invited them on a journey that would carry them to unfamiliar territory. In fact, Jesus pushed against their comfort zones in all the ways this is difficult for us and that is what's happening in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus and the disciples are on the move. He is leading them to new places. This morning we've read about that journey and this is the bible's way of wanting us to recognize how Jesus takes us beyond our comfort zones, too. The question is, are we ready? Will we follow him? Will we recognize his presence, not only where we are but where he wants us to be. And, as we journey with Christ, even when the way shakes us to our core, will we trust that even in the new place Christ will plant our feet on solid ground?

When Jesus is on the move, particularly in Mark's Gospel, it is often connected to the sea. The story begins when Jesus gathers the twelve on the shoreline and says, "Let's go to the other side." This was a big deal, going to the other side. They stood on the shore that defined the boundary of Judea. This was the disciples' home territory. The land, the customs, their way of life and the practice of their faith was connected to everything on this side of the sea. Now, tradition tells us that a number of the disciples were fishermen. Launching their boats from the shore was a daily routine but they fished with the familiar shoreline in sight. Everytime they ventured into the water it was with the certainty they would return to the familiar ground of home. Leaving the shore wasn't hard as long as they could safely get back to where they started. And so, the business of fishing wasn't about going to new places. Life for the disciples was about being anchored in the same place every day. All that changed when the 12 decided to follow Jesus. I love how the story says that when the disciples set sail they put Jesus in the boat "just as he was." Jesus fished for people. Jesus was constantly looking for new hearts that would open to the love of God. They took him as he was, the One who would not leave them where they were but would carry them to where he wanted them to be. "Let's go to the other side," he commanded and this set in motion a journey to an unfamiliar place. What was on the other side? The other side was Gentile territory. There was nothing comfortable about it. The other side was foreign ground. If they went to the other side it would propel the disciples far beyond their comfort zones. And, as we know from the story, the journey wasn't easy. It wasn't easy for them and it isn't for us, either.

It's funny the way this works but the older I get the more I think about the past. I suppose this is because the older we get the more of life there is to reflect upon. I remember as a young man it rarely occurred to me how much I still had to learn about life and the world. Not long ago I met with a young couple who are planning their wedding day. The couple have been together for a number of years and we were talking about the way they communicate. In the flow of the conversation I asked if the way they communicate has changed over the years. The soon-to-be groom quickly answered, "Absolutely, it's changed." He said, "We've grown. We've learned about each other. We're more aware of our needs and feelings. We're better at sharing with each other. You might say," he

responded, “we have matured.” That was a meaningful insight. To mature in life isn’t to arrive at a place where you have it all or know it all. Maturing is about acknowledging what we don’t know. A mature point of view is to be open to learning and listening. With maturity comes the awareness that life is an ever growing, changing experience. As a young man I didn’t think about what I still had to learn. I was comfortable in my confidence that I could do this life thing just as I was. Oh, if I only knew then what I know now.

When the disciples took Jesus with them, just as he was, the journey nearly sank the boat. Jesus never promises the journey to a new way of thinking, a new way of loving, a new way of serving will be easy only that he will be with us along the way. In my devotional ready this morning I was intrigued by a statement from Richard Rohr, a contemporary teaching of Christian thought. He wrote, “There is no authentic God-experience that does not situate us in a new place in the world.” One indication that God is moving in our lives is the experience of feeling unsettled and unsure. Just to recap, there is the tendency in us to keep things as they are. I’ve got my place. I know what I know. I’m not looking to change what is comfortable and familiar in my life or in my thinking. Well, if we want to be with Jesus just as he is then we’d better be ready to get rattled a bit. As night was falling and the boat set sail Jesus led the disciples into the middle of a storm. They thought it was the end of them. Jesus knew it was the way to the other side. When we are unsettled in life and when the journey makes us feel vulnerable because we don’t know what’s ahead, Jesus is the peace and calm that brings us to the other side. It’s not going to be easy but Jesus can bring us to a new way - a way that is more loving, less ready to judge, less ready to exclude and more ready to include. Jesus pushes our boundaries. “There is no authentic God-experience that does not situate us in a new place in this world.” This is one way to think about where we are in the midst of the storms of conflict that are blowing across the reality of our world. He’s the One who not only calls us to a new place but the One who is with us along the way. The turmoil around us, the turmoil within us, the turmoil between us doesn’t have to signal the end of us. Instead, it is the path that can lead us to where Jesus wants us to be.

As I close today just one more grace-filled detail from our story to carry with us. When they set sail from the shore the gospel says, “Other boats were with him.” (Mark 4:36) I don’t know where you come down on the matters of immigration or human sexuality, and all the rest. We’re clearly not all in the same boat but every boat, every life, yours and mine, the lives of those impacted by the issues of the day, all of us are with Jesus. Because Christ is with us the journey will carry us to a new place of deeper faith. Jesus accepts us just as we are but what good news that when Jesus is in the boat he promises not to leave us that way.