



"Carried by Grace"
Scripture – Mark 6:1-13
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, July 4, 2021

I do not travel lightly. Now, don't get me wrong — I don't think I *over* pack. I've never been the person at the check-in counter scrambling to re-organize my bags in a last-ditched effort to get my checked luggage below 50 pounds. On group trips, I'm not usually the one with the largest suitcase. But I do like to be prepared. I blame my father. He's an Eagle Scout who follows the Boy Scout motto to a tee: "Be prepared." So, whether camping in a National Park or staying in a New York high-rise, my dad brings along his pocket knife and a first aid kit ... just in case.

It seems the apple does not fall far from the tree. When packing for a trip, I usually throw a few extra outfits into the bag because you never know what you might spill on yourself. And I always bring enough sunscreen to cover an army in case — I don't know — Walgreens is out-of-stock? And I never leave home without my rain jacket and some light layers, even when the weather app forecasts 80 degrees and sunny all week long. I like to be prepared. Which means I usually return from a trip with a whole pile of stuff I never took out of the bag. And my husband just rolls his eyes and says sarcastically, "I'm so glad we brought that with us."

"Better to be safe than sorry," I say.

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has a different approach: *Take nothing with you*, he tells his disciples. *No bread, no bag, no money. Not even an extra shirt ... Travel lightly*, he says. In this passage, which is commonly referred to as the Mission of the Twelve, Jesus sends his disciples out into the Galilean countryside with nothing but a staff. They have no bread to eat, no money to pay for food or lodging; they cannot provide for themselves. Instead, they must rely on the hospitality of strangers.

It is interesting that Jesus sends his followers forth with such surprising instructions, particularly at this moment in their shared ministry. The Twelve have been with Jesus since chapter 3, when he called them "to proclaim the message and to have authority to cast out demons" (3:14b-15). Since then the disciples have heard Jesus reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of God. They have watched in wonder as he calmed the storm and cast out unclean spirits. They have witnessed power flowing through him — enough to cure a hemorrhaging woman, enough to restore a young girl to life. And, no doubt, they have noticed the reactions of the crowds; everywhere Jesus goes, people are overcome with amazement. Everywhere, that is, except Nazareth.

Here, at the beginning of chapter 6, Jesus returns home. And he does the very thing he's done in towns across Galilee — he walks into the synagogue on the sabbath day and begins to teach. Only now the congregation is

not made up of strangers. It's filled with people who've known Jesus since his parents brought him back from Bethlehem ... The baker who'd sold him loaves of bread whenever Mary sent him to the market. The boys — now men — who'd played games with Jesus in the street. The family with the curious little girl — the one who'd peppered Jesus with questions the day he came 'round to fix their broken table. These people are *not* overcome with amazement. Rather, this hometown crowd takes offense. They rebuff Jesus; they reject his teachings. Their response is so strong that it, momentarily, diminishes his extraordinary gifts: "[Jesus] could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them," Mark tells us. Now Jesus is the one who is amazed; he is "amazed at their unbelief."

But his experience in Nazareth does not derail his mission. Quite the opposite, in fact. Jesus responds to this rejection by sending out the Twelve — to towns that *might* receive the apostles with open arms, to communities that *might* receive the Gospel with open hearts. *Take nothing with you*, Jesus tells them. *No bread, no bag, no money. Not even an extra shirt. When you are invited into a house, stay there until you leave town. If a place does not welcome you or listen to you, move on and shake the dust off your feet.*

Ever the teacher, it seems Jesus is using Nazareth as a teaching moment — an opportunity to instill in his disciples a sense of resilience, of hope. With the exception of the early recruits — Peter and Andrew and James and John — the disciples have *not* seen Jesus encounter such rebuke. Thus far, they've mostly been witnesses to wonder: the Twelve have had front row seats as Jesus helped and healed, and as the newly-restored responded with gratitude and praise. But, as the Gospels make clear, the mission the apostles have accepted will bring its challenges. Like Jesus, they will experience rejection; and, like Jesus, they will need to remain steadfast to God's purpose. So, having endured hostility in the very place one would expect to receive hospitality, Jesus sends his disciples out with surprising instructions: *Take nothing with you.*

They cannot pack provisions. They cannot even pretend to be prepared. The disciples only have one option: Rely on the hospitality of strangers. They must trust they'll find welcome in some household, in some town; they must knock on doors hoping they'll encounter grace.

Given the experience Jesus just had in Nazareth, his instructions to the Twelve might seem overly optimistic, even foolish. But, I expect they are rooted in a deep and profound truth: God's grace is sufficient. It's as if Jesus is telling his disciples: No matter where your journeys lead, no matter what challenges you face along the way, God's grace is sufficient. Even when eyes fail to see and ears refuse to hear, God's grace is sufficient for this moment, for this mission.

Of course, this is *not* a new lesson. As people who've grown up hearing the stories of the faith, the disciples know how God works ... They know how God fed their ancestors with manna from heaven — raining down just enough each morning to satisfy them for the day. And they've heard how God commanded the ravens to bring bread and meat to the prophet Elijah, to sustain him during his days in the desert. Yes, the disciples know how God works.

And, now, Jesus is sending them out empty-handed — no bread, no bag, no money — to discover, for themselves, how God works. They are to carry nothing, save the assurance that grace will sustain them wherever they go.

Mark tells us very little about the Mission of the Twelve. At the end of this passage, the Gospel writer simply reports, "They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." A little later we witness their reunion; the apostles gather 'round Jesus to tell him all they had done and taught; then Jesus

invites them to come away and rest a while (6:30-31). It would seem the Mission was a success; the disciples return — likely exhausted, but surely encouraged — bearing stories of lives transformed. We know the Twelve were able to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed, but we have to imagine for ourselves the details of their journeys ...

How many doors did the apostles knock on before one opened in welcome? Which households received them with open arms and open hearts? What stories did they share around the tables where disciples accepted their daily bread — not as manna from heaven, but as a meal shared among strangers turned friends? Yes, we are left to imagine the circles of care that formed around the Twelve as they traveled from town to town; we are left to imagine the communities created as strangers welcomed Christ's servants and — in embracing both messengers and message — became partners in Christ's service, as well. But this we know: God's grace was sufficient. Through hands extended in welcome, through stories shared at table, through hearts open to receive the good news, God's grace carried the disciples on their journeys.

This is *not* a new lesson. It was *not* new for the Twelve, who'd grown up hearing the stories of the faith. It's *not* a new lesson for us either; we know how God works. It's just that, sometimes, we need a reminder. We need some new assurance that grace will carry us wherever we go.

I remember a moment on my own journey when that assurance came to my door ...

I was 22-years-old and eager to begin my year of service as a Young Adult Volunteer. I'd just arrived in India and I was ready ... I'd *been* ready. I'd raised the funds required of all volunteers to help subsidize the expense of the program. I'd read all the books our site coordinator had recommended — from essays about the legacy of colonialism to novels set in the Indian state I'd call home. I'd packed everything on the list ... and more! I was ready ... but I was not prepared. Looking back, I'm not sure anything could have prepared me for the journey ahead ... not even the assurance that God's grace would carry me through. No, I needed to discover this grace for myself.

Upon arriving in India, my fellow volunteers and I had two weeks to get acclimated — to recover from jet-lag, to learn a few key phrases in the local language, to practice the art of eating curry and rice with our hands. And, then, our site coordinator sent us out. Early on a Monday morning, he deposited us in the communities where we would live and work for the better part of a year.

That first night was a difficult one. I stood in my simple apartment staring at my packed suitcase and empty shelves thinking, "What am I doing here?" I was all alone, in a very foreign land, with eleven months to go. And as I sat on my bare mattress, on the verge of tears, there was a knock on the door ... "Are you coming to choir practice?" asked John and Rachel, an elderly couple I'd met at church the day before. "Come on," they said. "We'll drive you."

Turns out I didn't even have to knock on doors, hoping I'd encounter grace. Grace found me, through hands extended in welcome, through words of invitation, through the embrace of community. And — on that night, and in the months to come — God's grace was sufficient.

How many of us have discovered the same? Perhaps at a kitchen table in the highlands of Guatemala, while sharing home-made tamales and unlikely camaraderie with our sisters from the Association for Mam Christian Women. Or in gathering with neighbors from Friendship House, where circles of care are created as strangers become friends. Or in the living room of another from this family of faith, within relationships knit together here,

where we break bread and share the cup and celebrate our communion in Christ. Through moments too many and too ordinary to notice, by countless hands extended in welcome, we find assurance again and again: God's grace is sufficient. God's grace will *always* be sufficient. And this grace will carry us wherever we go.

Prayers of the People – Dick Jolly

Loving and gracious God, we come before you this morning, as we so often do, with much upon our hearts and minds. We find ourselves seeking peace and your presence as we work to understand your word and your call to each of us. We thank you for this time together and ask that you would help us to slow down and to focus our thoughts and feelings so that we might live with purpose, commitment and love. As we do so, we are grateful for the gift of your Son, Jesus, who evidenced in countless ways how we can live our lives in the light and inspiration of His.

We acknowledge, as is evidenced from today's scripture reading and sermon, that our way forward is not always easy. There can be challenges – of many different types – as we endeavor to follow your word. And yet, there is so much that provides us with inspiration and hope. Our community of faith, our friends and family, our knowledge of your presence, your steadfastness, your compassion and your grace. It is this which enables us to live as we otherwise would not find possible. And it is for this we are thankful, O God.

We think this morning of our country on the anniversary of its founding and of the values and principles upon which it is based. We are grateful for its high ideals and for its aspirations on behalf of justice and equality. At the same time, O God, we are aware that we have yet to succeed in making those ideals a reality across our land. Be with us as we continue the process of establishing fairness and justice for all. Help us to see that it is we, your people, who are called to further this effort and this calling in our time and in our place. And remind us, O God, as we commit to that holy task that you will be with us and sustain us if we but dare to ask.

Hear our prayers this morning, our God, those both spoken and unspoken, and grant us the assurance, the peace, and the inspiration only you can provide. This we ask with praise and with gratitude in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us how to live, and taught us how to pray saying ...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen