

Sermon – Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

It's great to be back amongst you this morning. My time away was spent camping at a couple of places in New York and some time at home. I love camping, especially by water. The first week I was camping up on Lake Ontario and the second week out on the south shore of Long Island. One of the aspects of camping I love is just being outdoors. But when you live outdoors you become quite vulnerable to the elements.

When I went up north I knew thunderstorms were predicted for the afternoon of my arrival and so I left the city early to ensure I was set up before they arrived. My camp site was elevated and overlooked Lake Ontario. I could see the storm clouds brewing in the distance and when I looked up to see the wind direction I knew they were coming for me. Within a couple of hours of arriving a huge thunderstorm blew through, howling wind, horizontal rain and thunder right above. It certainly tested my setup.

Once that cleared and I started to dry off the cold front materialized just as quickly as the thunder storm. This time it was the wind, howling from the northwest at 30mph. The temperature dropped about 10 degrees or more. Ginger panicked and sat out the rest of the night in the car. The power of both storms shook me out of any complacency I had about camping in the great outdoors.

The week before last you would have experienced the remnant of Hurricane Elsa as she roared through New York on Friday morning. Well I was camped by the beach. It was my second day. First the rain came, then the wind. Just after dawn the wind and the rain intensified. The tent was flapping madly with immense strain on the tent pegs anchoring it into the sand. When I looked at the weather map I realized I had about 6 hrs of high winds and rain ahead of me.

In all of the anxiety of that morning I was in awe of the storm system. It was the first time I had been in such a vulnerable place during such a storm. When the eye of the storm came over it became dead calm and the sun came out a little. Within an hour the wind shifted dramatically as the back side of the storm moved over us. The backside seemed even more intense.

The power of nature is immense and we are often powerless to withstand its effects. Nature's reaction to climate change is an increasing intensity of weather systems. The terrible drought and fires in the west, the frightening rain storm and flooding in Germany and Belgium. We are going to experience more of these types of storms if we collectively don't change our ways.

The big argument about climate change is whether the changes are normal evolution of the cycles of nature, or whether humans are contributing through the way we live. As ordinary folks we rely on our political leaders to make decisions for us to help to protect us now and in future years. We cede power to politicians and it can take on a very different role as we have witnessed over the past decade.

Politicians can use the power of their election to either deny the scientific research and ignore the problem or they can use their elected power to try and ensure the country is less vulnerable in the face of these highly destructive weather events. We entrust our politicians to use the power we give them to make our lives better and to ensure society as a whole flourishes.

Scripture is full of stories of the use of power by leaders both for the good of society and for selfish gain. The world in the time of Jeremiah, during the life of Jesus and now has changed dramatically in many ways, however the way humans use power has hardly changed at all. The prophet Jeremiah lived during the time of the exile of Israelites, when they were conquered by the Babylonians who enslaved them and marched them all north to Babylon.

Jeremiah experienced the way power corrupted leaders, and the way corrupted leaders divided their subjects rather than united them. Jeremiah lamented the failure of leaders to unite their people. He wrote about the Lord's disgust with the rulers who had scattered the chosen flock. He wrote that the Lord would ultimately deal with those that divide, but would also seek out the scattered and unite them so that they could once again flourish, be fruitful and multiply. Power can be used both ways – to divide but more importantly to unite.

The life of Jesus was all about bringing healing and reconciliation to the scattered flock. As the incarnation of God, Jesus lived out God's vision for the world, and for leaders. The gospel reading this morning from Mark's account of Jesus' life, is the top and tail of two significant stories about Jesus ministry. The missing text today relates to the feeding of the five thousand and the events around Jesus walking on water. Both these stories get their own focus on other Sundays.

In the first section, v30-34 Jesus demonstrates concern for his apostles, who had just returned from their mission journeys. He invited them on a retreat, that invaluable time away from the madness of society to be in quiet reflection, a time focused on healing and rest. However, the crowd had other ideas. They were impatient and weren't going to let Jesus and the others rest. Rather than Jesus getting annoyed with them for pursuing him relentlessly, he had compassion on them for his experience of them was that they were lost. They needed him and he made himself available to them.

The power that was inherent in Jesus came from God. He was able to exercise this power in any way he wanted. He used his power to feed over 5,000 people by miraculously multiplying the meager supplies they had. He also used his power to calm the seas and to lessen the anxiety of the disciples who were scared in the face of a mighty storm. But Jesus also used his power to heal and to comfort. Showing compassion and caring for others is a use of power for the good of society.

The writer of Ephesians tells us in today's epistle reading about Jesus' efforts to heal the societal fracture between the Jews and the gentiles. The fracture was large and dominated society in his day. Jesus preached peace and he preached reconciliation, first with God and then

with each other. He wanted nothing more than to remove division from society so that all people could come together to build the holy temple of God, which is within each of us.

The temple of God is built together spiritually. In other words, the temple of God exists in the body of Christ as we become bound together by a common spirit. The temple of God is not a cathedral, a basilica nor a temple or mosque. It exists in the unified, in the body of people who share peace.

Our country and many others, our church and many others continue to be divided by different points of view. Politically we can see how bi-partisanship in Washington, or any of the state capitals is very difficult. Tribalism has driven a wedge between the parties and it looks almost hopeless for us to expect that the two political parties would come together to deliver legislation that ensures all Americans can flourish and all can be helped to become the best they can be.

In the church, most denominations are divided over issues of doctrine and culture. Our church has been divided over women's ordination and gay ordination, over racism and over marriage. Every denomination in every religious faith struggles to heal from their differences. The worst of all is when people die, or are subjected to discrimination because of the hostility that exists.

In Christian faith traditions Jesus' teaching is plain to see. Jesus lived as God ordained him to live, as an example for all of us. He was compassionate, he cared for his friends and the outcasts. He put himself last so that he could care for the lost and the vulnerable. Jesus wasn't immune from being frustrated or angry, but he knew how to channel his power for the good and was not corrupted by the power he had.

We all have power and we all get to choose how we exercise that power, whether it be within our families, within our church or within wider society and its institutions. The power of nature can destroy our homes and our lives. The power of a leader – political, religious or otherwise, selfishly exercised, can do the same. Jesus didn't pick sides or play one side off against the other. He came to unify, to bring peace and to lift all of us up so that we can become the best we can be.

Mark tells us that all who touched Jesus were healed. As we are the body of Christ in this world, all who come near to us should be given the opportunity to be healed. Compassion for others, and for ourselves for that matter, is the way to genuine healing. Jesus showed us the way and now it is up to us to follow his lead.

Amen.