

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 9 The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
July 4, 2021

Ezekiel 2:1-5  
Psalm 123  
2 Corinthians 12:2-10 Mark 6:1-13

## Trying Something Different

How marvelous to see the faces of those of you gathered here in the nave at St Paul's this morning! Today is a day that many of us have looked forward to since March of 2020. No more masks at worship. No more signing in. No more distancing in the pews. No need to distance coming forward for communion. You can receive communion at the altar rail. And God be praised for the return of congregational singing!

Indeed, thanks be to God that as of July 1 in the Diocese of Southeast Florida, all COVID protocols are lifted with the exception of two. It's like Christmas, Easter, and the Fourth of July. And, in fact, it is the Fourth of July.

The two COVID protocols that are still in effect are these: first, for the time being, only the celebrant will receive the consecrated wine of the Eucharist. Second, for the time being, everyone is asked to continue sharing the peace by remaining in place and extending greetings of peace to those around them. For right now, at the peace, please no handshakes, kisses, or hugs.

I hope that all of it is good news for all of you. Of course, it is possible that if pandemic realities change again in our area that some or all of the previous protocols may be reinstated. We hope not, but we will move forward knowing that a return to some of them is a possibility.

As our amazingly dedicated senior warden Ray Warren noted in his most recent column in *The Epistle* newsletter, the lifting of these restrictions and the return to some of our most familiar and most beloved patterns is like coming home. Welcome home. If you are a member or regular attender at St Paul's, welcome home. If you are a guest today, welcome home. If you are joining us via Facebook Live, welcome home.

Being at home, feeling at home, feeling welcome: is there anyone who dislikes these feelings?

Being at home, feeling at home, these are good things, aren't they?

What about going home? As in back to the place you are from. That's perhaps a bit more of a mixed bag of emotions.

Going home is what Jesus does in today's gospel. He goes back to Nazareth where he grew up. He takes the disciples with him. They go to the synagogue on the sabbath day. It's their custom. It's what they've been brought up to do.

Earlier in Mark's gospel Jesus has stirred up trouble with the religious authorities by healing a man on the sabbath. This time he's not healing on the sabbath, he's teaching.

He's pretty good at it, too. People are taken aback, astonished, Mark says. *Wait a minute. We know this boy. He's a carpenter not a prophet. We know his mama. We know all four of his brothers and all his sisters, too. How'd he learn to teach like this? And we've been hearing reports about a masterful healer traveling around the countryside near here. He's the one. How'd he get this power?*

Where I come from, somebody would have been sure to say, *He's done got above his raisin'*. Which being interpreted means, *He's become too big for his britches*—or too big for his cloak, as the case may be. Message: he doesn't know his place.

Other people are saying all these things about Jesus. He's not saying any of this stuff about himself.

But Jesus gets it. They didn't even recognize him at first, but when they realize who he is, they don't accept him.

Mark says the synagogue crowd were offended by Jesus. And Mark says that Jesus was amazed by their lack of belief. They didn't get it. They didn't get him.

What would have happened if his hometown folks had received him as a favorite son, as a homeboy made good? What would have happened if they had received him for who he was rather than getting stuck on what they thought they knew about him from long ago?

I wonder if Jesus wondered about these same things. Did he say to himself, *Y'all, this is my home; you're my people. I love you. Let's figure out what God would have us do together?*

I wonder if he had planned or hoped to stay there a while. We can't know. They didn't receive him or his message or his love.

So, what does he do? He tries something different.

Instead of hanging around in his hometown feeling hurt or angry or betrayed or all of those things and some others besides, instead of trying to force his home community to do things they weren't ready for, he hits the road again.

He travels with the disciples to different villages, and he keeps on teaching.

And then he does something really different: He sends the twelve disciples out on their own.

He sends them, just like God sent Ezekiel in the first reading. Except Jesus sends them in pairs. Not as lone rangers but in dynamic duos. The buddy system. The accountability partner approach. And they go out.

The disciples realize to *their* amazement that they can do all kinds of things in the spirit of Jesus, with the blessing of Jesus, following the teaching of Jesus. Things they had no idea they had the capacity to do. Things they would never have tried if Jesus had been right there with them because they would have looked only to him to do everything. Be the wonderworker. Give us a sign. Fix it for us. But over the weeks and months and years in his company they will at last see that Jesus is inviting them into partnership not dependency.

They go out when he sends them. They learn that not everything will work everywhere; specificity and particularity come into the equation.

I think maybe the sending of the twelve was an experiment. Both the gospels of Mark and Luke relate it. In Luke the twelve are sent out in chapter 9, and in chapter 10, Jesus sends out 70 disciples in pairs. It seems like maybe both Jesus and the disciples learned some things in that experiment of sending the twelve, things that they tweaked and reiterated and scaled in the sending of the 70.

In sending both the twelve and the 70, Jesus gives some particular instructions. I think he learned the applicability of these from his own hometown experience. He tells them to go where they are received, where people welcome them, where people can and will hear them. And he indicates that if someone or someplace can't receive them, they shouldn't worry about it and should just keep going.

Not everyone will receive us, even when we go in Jesus' name, in some cases, especially if we go in Jesus' name. Because of all the manipulative enterprises in which Jesus' name and God's name have been, in effect, taken in vain, some people do not trust the church, that is, the company of people who say we follow Jesus, as far as they can throw us. And honestly, we can't blame them. Their wounding is real. And their skepticism is justified.

Many, many people who come to and who live in Key West will never come inside this space. Yes, the doors are open twelve hours or more each day. But many people will never come inside. Not because it's not beautiful. Not because of physical accessibility issues. Not because we wouldn't welcome them. But because there are real obstacles to their entrance created by their previous experiences of church and Christians and bad theology.

So, let's try something different. Let's continue to welcome everyone who comes here. And, with respect to all the people who won't or can't come here, let's go to them. Let's be like Jesus. Let's meet them where they are. Not with an agenda to get them to come here but with an intention to be present to them there, wherever they are.

All the COVID protocols put into place were intended to help us prioritize love of neighbor by promoting public health and the common good. We followed them because they were indicated. Now that they are almost all lifted, we are not going back to how things were before. We are moving forward into how things need to be. What is indicated now in the life and ministry of St Paul's? How can we find out? What have you been hearing? What have you been imagining?

Six weeks ago Friday I and our pup arrived in Key West. We feel very much at home here with you. Feeling at home is good. So on this happy morning, let me conclude with this: *You're my people. I love you. Let's figure out what God would have us do together.*