

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
6th Sunday after Epiphany
February 17, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 40:25-31

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 6:12-19 NRSV

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Moving Out with Jesus

Any number of us live in a place where we were born, but a larger number of us live where we did not grow up. We left those places because of job requirements, choices for education, military service, or just for a change in environment and location. But, that is not the end of our urge to move or to **keep moving**. As we got older, we downsized our homes for all kinds of practical reasons: saving on utilities and eliminating lawn maintenance. We also observe retirees moving to former **vacation spots** to live out their dreams of better weather and year-long recreation pursuits such as boating, golf, or tennis. Or, parents of adult children follow their offspring to **new locations** where these young people have careers and, for many of us, grandchildren. Hopefully, that move came with **full disclosure** for the receiving family members, as the dynamics among the family can change significantly. But, overall decisions like these are convenient and **rewarding** on many levels.

Others move because they have to: displaced by unwanted job changes, loss of employment, or other more private reasons. When we move, we use terms, such as “**moving out**.” That is a very common term in the **military**, used to move a body of troops, supporting equipment, and supplies. This final command of “**Move out!**” quickly produces considerable motion and energy, because the military unit is moving off to the objective or the support area or for a new assignment.

Any of these circumstances convey a sense of **physical movement**, certainly. But, moving out in our personal lives creates **emotional responses**: sometimes fear, sometimes regret, sometimes keen excitement. At times, we know that this act of moving out is deep enough to produce what I like to term: **transformation**. In this light, we think of joining the military, going off to college or boarding school, or creating **a new household** with a spouse or loved one.

I put this before us, because our **scripture lesson** today finds Jesus continuing a journey that began at his **baptism with John** and has continued throughout Galilee: **healing and teaching**, encountering crowds, and recruiting his first followers: Simon called Peter, James, and John. We took up that story **last week** in its setting on a lakeside: men in boats working nets and a surprisingly miraculous **catch of fish**. All of those goings-on led up to the sudden **call of Peter, James, and John** as disciples of Jesus. Unmistakably, these events were demonstrations of **God's power** in Jesus. And, today we find Jesus continuing **to move** through Galilee and continuing to **demonstrate** this power.

Along the way, Jesus recruits additional followers, now named **disciples** and apostles. The list of disciples is pretty clear here, but it differs slightly from other lists in *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *John*. This naming is something that we can ignore for now because, again, I want us to focus on the extraordinary manner of Jesus in conducting himself and in using his **time and energy**.

The first portion of the lesson describes Jesus moving to **a level place** to address his followers. Typically, workers improved or created a level place for **heads of state** or kings. This description of a "level place" reflects the **high regard** the writer has for Jesus throughout the *Gospel of Luke*. Upon arrival, Jesus prepares to make statements about the **new life** he commands for his followers. These sayings which follow our scripture lesson are called the "**Sermon on the Plain**" here in *Luke*. In the *Gospel of Matthew* you find a more complete array of sayings in the "**Sermon on the Mount.**" Portions of it are in *Mark*, as well. And, some of you will recall that the *Gospel of John* is on another track altogether. In *John*, these words are not presented as concisely, but the sentiment of that Fourth Gospel takes up these topics and **expands them** through long prayers and statements by Jesus throughout that gospel.

The common aspect throughout all four Gospels is the **shift in emphasis** for these acts of **faith and love**: healing, casting away demons, and creating a general sense of **awe and wonder**. The healings address **physical ailments** and conditions which likely would be addressed in well-reasoned terms and diagnoses today. The demon possession could be nearly anything, and fortunately for both the pastor and parishioners today, we can skip most of our thoughts and opinions on evil spirits, possession and exorcism for the duration of the morning.

But, at the heart of all of these activities and descriptions is the **power of Christ**. It is causing quite a **commotion** in the land, even outside of Galilee. All manner of people want to get close to Jesus: to touch him and to feel and **receive his healing power**. These verses convey an overwhelming aspect of **awe and wonder**, and the Gospels record this faithfully. However, since the 18th century educated and **enlightened people** have resisted this bit of wonder which involves **our faith**. These persons used logic and reason to address these instances, typically called miracles, which are difficult to explain.

This kind of doubt is in stark contrast to the **artwork** produced in the 200-300 years which preceded the **Enlightenment**. Much of that art survives today. The various painters used distinctive ways to signify the unusual aspect of these occurrences: They used **glowing white** colors to surround the head or body of Jesus or a particular disciple or martyr. They placed halos around the heads of Jesus, Mary, and the disciples. Icons in the Orthodox faith traditions still use these means in art as part of their worship spaces, likely for these same reasons.

Some still criticize this aspect of our faith, stating that these responses of **awe and wonder** fall into an area that borders on **superstition** or fantasy. But, today we are not taking on these verses in any literal sense. Certainly, they were **not composed** in that way. Nearly all of scripture is a deep and consistent **expression of faith**, created and influenced by the **mystery** of faith and belief. Clearly, they are **acts of wonder** brought about through the **power of God**. Indeed, they are nearly **unexplainable**, just like the reversal of a fatal case of **cancer** today, surprising both the caregivers and the patient! Truly, for all concerned it seems to be a **miracle**, no matter how physicians and scientists explain it.

In light of this, we must keep in mind that nearly all of scripture represent accurate **theological** descriptions. They are not factual reporting, as we see on our news services. Such **literal approaches** are a hindrance for us in gaining a **better understanding** of scripture. In fact, this is the advantage of having a consistently **educated clergy** that can examine scripture in **the original languages** and search through other writings in order to express the **underlying truths** involved in these descriptions in the scriptures.

For this reason, scholars and pastoral educators increasingly emphasize the mindset and circumstances that existed in **the early church**. In this way, we can better understand the purpose of the recording of these activities in scripture: That is, why they are **recorded** in just this way. And, with more curiosity and an **openness to God**, we can find much **deeper meaning** to these verses and to the purpose and **existence of Christ** himself.

The scripture lesson today shows **Jesus** and the disciples continually **on the move**. They took many people with them, and along the way Jesus selected **twelve** among them as his core group for **training and instruction**. The names differ, but the number is consistently the same: twelve. Very likely, this ties back to the **twelve tribes of Israel**. And, twelve is one of those “perfect” numbers that are found throughout the *Bible*: This may include any number of meanings tied to the multiples of three and four, as well.

Scholars hope to learn more about these **finer points** we discussed today. Regardless, we can begin by knowing that **Jesus** is on the move. He left Nazareth and Capernaum. And, traveling throughout Galilee, the people **received** this healing and power enthusiastically in Galilee and beyond. People came from all around, including **Jerusalem** which is over 100 miles away and **four to five days journey** by foot. Even more significantly, Jesus healed the **common people**: not just those who could afford a physician. He healed **all comers**: the blind, the lame, and those possessing **unexplainable illnesses**.

It was obvious to everyone surrounding Jesus that this **power** he demonstrated was, literally, **beyond this world**. In response, **the crowd** pressed in toward Jesus, hoping to touch his clothing and **receive his power** for their healing. We will learn later that Jesus is very aware of this process. But, for now Jesus is **on the move**. He has more to do and more to say. That is **his call** and his **ministry**.

Like Jesus, our **faith** should not stay in one place. We should be **moving our faith** out from its routine. We should study and **pray** and look toward the future with excitement and **anticipation**. We should pray for **God's will** being done, and diminish our personal goals, especially if those goals create **conflict** with the unselfish witness and **teachings** of Jesus Christ.

In truth, any of us can move out: We do that all the time mentally and physically at major times in our lives, or in falling asleep during **a sermon** that goes a bit too long. But, the example of Jesus forces us to **examine our own faith** and our **faith journey**. Where is our faith when we make **a decision**? What priority do we have for **sharing our gifts**: not just our financial assets, but our gifts of **compassion** and empathy and **love**? Can we feel the **power of God**, which remains in Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord? Can you and I **move out** and into a new place of **faithful service** to God and to the **kingdom**?

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