

TALES OF A HOMETOWN HERO

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Pentecost 6
Mark 6:1-13

Dear friends in Christ, grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and His Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I think it must be hard being the hometown hero, not that I ever was one. Oh, I dreamed about it; about achieving something huge in my life, and returning to Roseville with a parade in my honor, and having the ice arena named after me, but that never happened. It never really happened for Denis either. Denis, or Dude as he was called at Stillwater High School, was one of eleven children in the McDonough family. Dude played high school football, but in the words of Coach George Thole, “The kid was skin and bones at 156 pounds. Yeah, he worked hard, but he was slow, and I think he got, like, three interceptions his senior year. I heard he was kind of a smart kid.” Coach was right; Dude was smart. He went on to play football at St. Johns University, and got his law degree at Georgetown.

And six years ago, Dude came home to Stillwater for a visit. President Obama had just named him the White House Chief of Staff. People at St. John’s University, and Georgetown University, and the White House thought Denis McDonough is pretty special, but in Stillwater, he was still just the Dude; a skinny kid who wanted to play football, and nobody really thought of him as a hometown hero.

Early in the first century, I think Jesus must have had a similar reputation. He was one of at least seven kids raised by Mary, and I say it that way because in Mark’s gospel, Joseph isn’t even mentioned. In fact, could there even have been a little bit of local talk about “where was the father of all these kids?” Jesus was no hometown hero; he was just one of those ragamuffin kids living down the street in Nazareth.

So why should we be surprised when Jesus returns to Nazareth and stands up in the temple to preach, and not everyone is bowled over? Oh, some people were impressed; they said, “Where does this man get his power and authority from?” But others were underwhelmed by his presence. “Who does this snot-nosed kid think he is? He grew up here, and he comes back to teach us! He’s just a little too big for his britches for our taste.” And they were offended.

But Jesus was affected; did you notice that in the text? After he was dissed by their criticism, we are told that Jesus could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

For those of us who came through confirmation, we learned about the “omni’s.” We were taught that Jesus was omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, – that is, “all knowing, all-powerful, and ever-present” and then to read in this account that he could do no deeds of power in his own hometown; well, that’s a bit unnerving. Just the previous day, Jesus cast the demon out of a man, healed a teenage girl, and then healed a woman

who just touched his robe. And now, when he is around his family and friends who are too familiar with him, he can only cure a couple of people with sore throats? Even Jesus is amazed at this!

So they left Nazareth, and they went to other towns, and Jesus sent his disciples two-by-two, out to preach and teach and heal. And they were wildly successful! They cast out many demons, and anointed many with oil and healed them.

Now, if we look at these two incidents independently – the one in Nazareth and the one after Nazareth – it appears that Jesus is just including his disciples in this ministry. But if we consider them together, there is a hint that **Jesus absolutely needed them** to carry out his mission. Was Jesus saying to those twelve men that their involvement was necessary to have God’s work done in the world? And if Jesus needed their involvement to do God’s work, could it be that He needs our involvement too? Let’s not get too caught up in whether God is able to touch people’s lives without us. Of course he can! But let’s ponder for the moment that Jesus wants to include us his ministry on earth.

- Is Jesus going to mow your neighbor’s lawn? Probably not.
- Is He going to cook a meal for the family in grief? I don’t think so.
- Did Jesus arrange a mission trip for our teens, or play a game with them at Vacation Bible School? I doubt it.

Of course Jesus *could* do all of this, but he chooses to employ the Church to do these things on his behalf in a hurting world. This is not “good works” that will puff us up. This is doing the work of a disciple, which is exactly whom we claim to be.

In the 16th century, St. Theresa wrote a poem about the ministry Christ has given to us. Here are the words:

God has no hands but our hands to do his work today;
God has no feet but our feet to lead others in his way;
God has no voice but our voice to tell others how he died;
And, God has no help but our help to lead them to his side.¹

What we do when we leave worship each week can have an impact on our part of the world. We don’t have to travel to Haiti – our Houston - to love children. We need not give up our jobs and enter mission work full time. We don’t even have to memorize the bible, just in case someone asks us a religious question we can’t answer. All we have to do is be willing. I think the disconnect comes when we leave church and set aside all the good things we hear and say and sing and pray, only to become consumed about our wants and needs. You do that, right? I do that. We forget, or we conveniently misremember, that Jesus sends his disciples out to serve the world right where they are.

I want to leave you today with a rabbinical story that the Jews have heard for centuries, but it’s new to me, and perhaps you as well. A long time ago in the northern part of

¹ Although St. Theresa first recorded the original concept of our hands being the hands of Christ in the world, Annie Flint Johnson, an American poet, captured it in poetic form 1866 – 1932.

Israel, a man who was a baker was sleeping, as usual, through Sabbath morning services. Every now and then, he would almost wake up, trying to get comfortable on the hard wooden bench, and then sink back into a deep sleep. One morning he awoke just long enough to hear the chanting of the Torah verses from Leviticus in which God instructs the children of Israel to place twelve loaves of challah bread on a table in the tabernacle.

When services ended, the man woke up. He dreamt that God had come to him in his sleep and had asked him personally to bring twelve loaves of challah to God. The man felt honored that God should single him out, but he also felt a little foolish. Of all the things God could want from a person, twelve loaves of challah did not seem very important. But who was he to argue with God. He went home and baked the bread.

Upon returning to the synagogue, the baker carefully arranged the loaves and said to God, "Thank You for telling me what you want of me. Pleasing you makes me very happy." Then he left.

Not long after he had gone, the poorest Jew in the town, the synagogue janitor, entered the sanctuary. All alone, he spoke to God. "O Lord, I am so poor. My family is starving; we have nothing to eat. Unless you perform a miracle for us, we will surely perish." Then, as was his custom, he walked around the room to tidy it up. When he reached the altar, there before him were twelve loaves of challah! "A miracle!" exclaimed the poor man, "I had no idea you worked so quickly! Blessed are You, O God, who answers our prayers." Then he ran home to share the bread with his family. There was enough to feed his family, enough to sell some, and enough to give some bread away to another hungry family.

Minutes later, the man who had baked the bread returned to the sanctuary, curious to know whether or not God had eaten the challah and saw that the loaves were gone. "Oh, my God!" he shouted, "You really ate my challah! I thought you were teasing. This is wonderful. You can be sure that I'll bring another twelve loaves next Sabbath – with raisins in them too!"

The following week, he brought a dozen loaves to the synagogue and again left them in the ark. Minutes later, the poor man entered the sanctuary. "God, I don't know how to say this, but I'm out of food again. Seven loaves we ate, four we sold, and one we gave to charity. But now, nothing is left and, unless you do another miracle, we surely will starve." He approached the altar and slowly looked at the table. "Another miracle!" he cried, twelve more loaves, and with raisins too! Thank you God; you are wonderful!"

The challah exchange became a weekly ritual that continued for many years. And, like most rituals that become routine, neither man gave it much thought. Then, one day, the rabbi, detained in the sanctuary longer than usual, watched one man place the dozen loaves on the altar and the other man redeem them.

The rabbi called the two men together and told them what they had been doing.

“I see,” said the first man sadly, “I thought I had been giving bread to God, but God doesn’t really eat challah.”

“I see,” said the other man sadly, “I thought I had been receiving bread from God, but God doesn’t really bake challah.”

Then the rabbi asked them to look at their hands. “Your hands,” he said to the first man, “are the hands of God giving food to those who are hungry. And your hands,” said the rabbi to the older man, “are also the hands of God, receiving gifts from those who have more than enough to eat. You see, God has no hands but our hands.”²

In a few moments, I will ask Stacy Johnson and Bob Clarke to come forward with those young people who are leaving tomorrow for Houston. They will be hosting a sort of “traveling vacation bible school, called “Camp Noah.” But they will be more than just counselors; they will be consolers, and encouragers, and wound-dressers, and listening ears to dozens whose lives are still in disarray from a hurricane or two. They will be God’s hands, and hugs, and voices. And God will use them. I hope they will come back on a Thursday night in August and share their mission moments and how their own lives were changed.

But today, I wonder how you will use your hands, and your voices, and your gifts for God in the coming days. And once I am done serving as a pastor, how will I use mine? Will God make us hometown heroes, or will we just be Steve, and Marilyn, and Jason and Ellis, and Susan, when we touch the least and the last and the lost for Jesus’ sake...because we can? Thanks be to God. Amen.

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²*Jewish Spiritual Awareness*, by Lawrence Kushner (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997), pp. 67-71.