

Our Role in Society
Mark 6:1-13
Colebrook Congregational Church
July 5, 2015 / Ordinary 14

The Church I grew up in has been going through a lot of chaos lately. It used to be one of the larger Congregational churches in the nation and had steady pastors. Now, they have gone through several pastors and many have left, avoiding the divisive conflicts among the congregants. There was even talk about calling me to be the pastor there. My mom used to be on staff there, and had a front row seat to the chaos. During this time, today's passage was very close to her. The first part, how Jesus was rejected in Nazareth, His hometown, is the source for our tradition of not calling pastors to churches that they grew up in; because my mom did not want me involved in that mess. And the second part, because she finally wiped their sand from her feet and transferred her membership to an other church.

So, Mark is giving us an account of the beginnings of Jesus' ministry. He was rejected by his kin and neighbors because they knew Him. They watched Him grow up. They experienced His terrible twos, His defiant phases, Him as a teenager. Then suddenly, He is doing miracles and being so wise, talking in parables and leading a group of disciples around. They couldn't believe it. How could the kid they knew become the person they saw doing those things? They couldn't get past that fact to see the truth about Jesus. They just couldn't do it. Even Jesus was baffled by it.

But in His wisdom, He acknowledged their mental block by saying how prophets are not heeded in their own towns or even their own homes. It is understandable. It's why Pastors traditionally will not serve the church they were raised up in. On the one hand, it would be easy to do so. They would already know the members of the church, know the history, the relationships, everything they would need. However, the members would all know them, all the foolish stuff they did growing up, and to some members, they would always be that little kid. Who among us would want to be always remembered for what they did as children?

I don't think anyone would want to be always remembered for what they did when they were younger. I know I was often a brat as a kid, even at church,

and I knew that I could not serve there as a Pastor, for I would always be that bratty kid to some. In fact, after my Confirmation, I became an assistant Sunday school teacher, and after my first Sunday doing that, I went back to all my Sunday School teachers and apologized for my behavior.

Next, Jesus sends out His disciples with instructions for spreading the Word. Stay where they are welcomed, but leave where they weren't. Even go so far as to brush off the dirt of that place from their feet. I've always wondered if that was an Aramaic or Greek idiom that just happened to translate pretty well into English. But it literally and symbolically means that they shouldn't take anything from the bad situations with them when they leave. If they are rejected, they should not make a fuss, and just leave, taking nothing from that incident with them.

I sat before my computer on Friday considering this sermon while watching the musical *1776* for inspiration, trying anything to distract from what had been bothering me all week. I did realize that there is a bit of a connection between the two. John Adams was obnoxious and disliked, so he could not be the one to propose to independence, because everyone else would reject it, because it came from him, whom they knew and disliked. So, the resolution on independence had to come from someone else. There is a similar disconnect with the people in the passage not receiving an important message.

But what had been bothering me all week was something I had heard about several times. In the wake of a Supreme Court decision, an organization has decided to respond by training and equipping pastors to run for public offices. Their justification was a statement that there should not be a separation between church and state.

No matter which side of the debate you come down on, what they said should be a worry. As a student of history, I remember how we had Congregationalists & Jews in New England, Quakers in Rhode Island, Presbyterians in New York and New Jersey, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists & even some Catholics in the South, and then in Pennsylvania, it was a safe haven for all types, including the despised Anabaptists. Most of these groups

did not play well with each other, hence why they came here to escape the repression in Europe with its state religions and religious war across the continent. So, their justification of advocating a combination of church and state did not make historic sense to me.

If there was a civil religion in this country, I believe that it is us Congregationalists. Even though we were the state-sponsored religion in New England, we allowed others to exist and believe as they will, even non-Christians, who were allowed to use our buildings until they could build their own. Our facilities were open to use by all citizens, hence we were called Meetinghouses. And there was something called the ecclesiastical society in each town, which made all the administrative and financial decisions for the church. And it was made up of town citizens whether they were members of the church or not. While we were the establishment, we did not act that way.

As Scott reminded us yesterday, George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” And I think that organization that wants to mix church and state has forgotten the past, which our ancestors had not and built in to their system mechanisms that prevented the horrors their ancestors experienced in Europe. Our ancestors remembered the chaos caused by the combination of church & state and fled here to be away and safe from that sort of thing. That is why I have been bothered by that group all week, their vision of the church's role in society.

So, what is the church's role in our society where we live in a country that guarantees the freedom of every citizen to worship whoever and in whatever manner that they choose, even if it is to reject worship?

I believe that the church's role in our society is to be supportive of the community we are in, meeting their needs. Be it providing a meeting space, hosting a food pantry, or helping our neighbors when times are tough for them. We are individually Called by Jesus to do what we can to serve the needs of our neighbors, to show them Christian Love no matter what. When you put together a bunch of faithful Christians in a church, that ability to serve the needs of our neighbors in our community increases by the combined finances and sheer manpower. We can accomplish more together

as a unit, than as individuals.

Our role in society is to help make the lives in our community better overall. We use our space to host AA and community events like the ceremonies yesterday. We are going to host the Colebrook Store's Open Mic night and possibly some Historical Society talks, to the benefit of the cultural life of Colebrook. We support our First Responders who serve our community. And we support the efforts of the other community service agencies in town.

And, in an era of apathy, the role of the church in society is to care. Not to control, not to dictate, but to care about those in need, those who would be forgotten or neglected, and to ensure that, since it is self-evident that we are all created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, that we all have Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

[PAUSE]

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the peace of mind that you give us through Jesus, and giving us the means to find calm in our everyday lives. We pray that we experience Your serenity whenever we need it, and that no matter what happens, no matter how much we want to panic, we remain calm and serene.

We pray for everyone who needs you. We pray for all who are sick and are suffering are healed; and that you guide the hands of their caregivers. We pray for all who are alone, that we can bring them company. We pray for all who are in distress, that we can bring them comfort. We pray for the safety of all those who place themselves in harm's way, protecting us from dangers. We pray for the forgiveness of sins, and we thank you for your understanding. We pray for peace throughout your creation.

We also pray for...

May Your presence bring us the calm needed in these stressful times. And we pray that you move us to help bring serenity to others that may need it, use us to be instruments of peace in your service, in Jesus's name we pray, Amen.