

“The Founding of the Church”

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 6B

Mark 6:1-13

Maybe because, like many of you, I’m exhausted by the last few years of political contentiousness, and of the shenanigans of elected politicians, but I’m glad that we get to come to church this weekend and submit to texts of scripture that, as far as I can tell have no explicit political interest whatsoever. This morning’s gospel depicts Jesus’ trouble with his family and also his commissioning and sending of his disciples. No politics of the right or the left there.

Or, is there?

It’s 4 July, the day when we celebrate our national Independence, the founding of our Republic. We celebrate the day when a group of very talented people – the so-called founding fathers – gathered and took the risk of founding a new republic. The national day of independence is, for most people, a day to get off work and to enjoy the delights summer. Sometimes, amid the fireworks, the vacationing, trips to the beach or mountains, 4 July is a time to step back and take stock of our nation. If we do that, then we often give thanks for the blessings of this democracy. Sometimes, if we are in a reflective mood, we might give critical assessment to our nation. How can we be better as a people? What might our nation do to be a true democracy with blessings for all? How can we live up to the vision of our founders on this day when we celebrate the founding of our country?

I want to propose that we do something a bit different. Here in church, with this morning’s gospel set before us, I propose that we reflect upon *the founding of the Christian church*. How did we, in our beloved congregation, get here?

Because that is what I hear celebrated in this Sunday’s gospel from Mark 6. Let me put this in context. Jesus, as we have heard, appears to have been rejected by members of his own family. Though he and his teaching have attracted crowds, they turn against him.

And maybe that is part of the reason why Jesus turns toward a small group of ordinary people and commissions them to be his disciples, sending them forth to do the work that he has been doing:

He called for the Twelve and sent them out in pairs. He gave them authority over unclean spirits. He instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a walking stick—no bread, no bags, and no money in their belts.... So they went out and proclaimed that people should change their hearts and lives. They cast out many demons, and they anointed many sick people....

Jesus has burst forth on the scene preaching that God’s realm is coming near. He is been teaching about that coming kingdom. He is performed signs and wonders to indicate that the time for a change of administrations has come. He is gone head-to-head with the powers that be, religious, governmental, and demonic.

Now Jesus turns to these 12 ordinary people and calls them and sends them out into the world to do the very same things he has been doing. He is sending them out to proclaim and to call people to transformed living. Is sending them to go head-to-head with the demonic and to perform acts of healing.

This is a rather remarkable moment in the gospel of Mark. Mark's gospel begins with an introduction of Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, the Son of God. With an opening acclamation like that we expected some amazing signs and wonders.

But did we expect that that same Messiah, Son of God would then turn around and delegate his messianic, saving, world – transforming work to this group of ordinary people?

And by the way, as we have seen in Mark's gospel, these disciples are very, very ordinary. They misunderstand Jesus from the very first. They never seem to get the point of his teaching. When Jesus performs some miraculous act, they seem befuddled and baffled as the crowds who clamor after him.

Maybe you are thinking that Jesus has waited until the sixth chapter of the gospel to call these disciples, vetting them, observing their behavior, discovering their talents, until he was at last ready to call them.

Forget it. These disciples moved from dumb to dumber. They remain clueless, stumbling along after Jesus, all the way to the end of the gospel. Mark seems to go out of his way to demonstrate that, for whatever reason they were chosen to be disciples, it is not because of their gifts and talent.

And I am saying that all of us here this day ought to watch closely because what we are seeing here, in Jesus calling to himself and sending out from himself these Twelve, we are seeing the birth of the church. Our founding as God's people. In this scene we are witnessing the equivalent of the church's Constitutional Convention. Our foundation. Our founding moment.

This story is the rationale for why we are gathered here this Sunday. In fact, even though you may not have been consciously aware of it, this story of Jesus calling and sending of the disciples explains why you are here this morning. Those first disciples are the precursors for all of us.

I'm sorry if you thought that God works solo. Maybe you thought that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and can do anything God wants all by God's self. Well, there's something about this God who comes to us as Jesus Christ Colts ordinary people to work with him. Jesus, the great delegator. The Savior who chooses not to save the world by himself.

Jesus sends these ordinary people out to do the very same things that he does. I wonder if Matthew or Mark thought of themselves as preachers. I wonder if they had to any training our gifts for proclaiming the gospel. Jesus doesn't seem to worry about that. Here he calls, commissions, ordains them to proclaim the good news.

Had any of the disciples any previous medical training? I doubt it. And yet, they are sent out to do miraculous healing work.

What a way to inaugurate and carry through the new Kingdom of God! And yet, it is uniquely Jesus' way of doing things.

I'm not going to go into great detail to illustrate how, for me, you, yes wonderfully ordinary **you**, are the best illustration for the truth of this biblical passage. I'm not going to go into great detail because I think if you are committed enough to show up here *on July 4*, worshiping Jesus, submitting to a sermon, I ought to give you a bit of a break!

I will just say that you are here because *Jesus put you here*. You may have reservations about Christianity. There may be lots of things you don't understand, beliefs that you are unsure if you can affirm. Maybe you have problems with the way the church is organized or led. May I just remind you that you are here not because of what you believe, feel, or think about the church and its ministry. You are here because Jesus put you here. Some way or another, he found a way to call you. Just like you call those first disciples.

Perhaps you have reservations about your own gifts and abilities to do the work of proclamation, healing, and demon exorcism that Jesus assigns to you. Don't worry too much about that. Your authorization rests not in your own abilities and talents. You are doing this work because Jesus has sent you. He has assigned you. You are a disciple, not first of all because of your faith in him, but because of his faith in what his love can do working through you.

That's how each of us got here. Happy Founding of the Church Day. Now, let's go out and celebrate!

—*William H. Willimon* © 2021