

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Mark 6:1-13
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona

“He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff.”

Over the last year or so, most of us have not taken many journeys beyond our state, region, neighborhood, or even our home. We haven't had to think much about what to pack or take with us, or consider how much our luggage weighs so we can avoid extra airline fees. But we have had a lot of time to think about what is important, what is essential, what things we hope for, what people we want to spend time with in-person, and what experiences we want share in that create memories that are treasured across generations. As we take steps toward moving out of the pandemic, we've also had time to think about relationships we want to mend, what things we can leave behind, and what ways of being no longer serve us, our communities, or the kingdom of God.

Now that the fire and monsoon seasons are upon us, some of us have more immediate opportunities to consider what things to take with us in the event of a mandatory evacuation, and, more importantly, how we can share in the hospitality of God with our neighbors, both human and non-human. In times like these, we have opportunities to assess the quality of our relationships with people, places, and things.

Over time, we have come to value the meaningful connections we've developed with people and places. But our relationship with things seems rather out of balance. In America, our culture of consumerism teaches us to place excessive value on possessions, to the extent that we need extra closet space, larger backyard sheds, and sometimes even rented storage units to protect all of our extra stuff. We forget what is in storage, or where we have placed a supposedly precious item. Rather than spend time looking for it, we just go out and buy another one.

And then there is the emotional and psychic baggage that we may not even be aware of until it bursts forth during a crisis moment like an overstuffed, worn out piece of luggage – that is, unless we have been doing the ongoing work of selfcare that invites

intentional reflection and action toward physical wellness, emotional healing, and spiritual wholeness; that is, unless we have been engaging in the ongoing work of assessing relationships with ourselves, each other, and God. Jesus teaches us to take nothing for our journey except the indiscriminate hospitality of God. And yet, we continue to resist inspecting our own baggage, and carry with us ideologies that for generations have led to cruelty, injustice, hypocrisy, and greed.

Our world is essentially not that different than the one that Jesus and his disciples occupied. We need healthy food, clean water, protective clothing, and shelter from the elements. And we need trusting relationships, that we all may grow and thrive among families and households, and communities and nations. When Jesus brought his new friends home to meet his family and neighbors, I imagine that he expected a certain kind of welcoming and hospitality. But Jesus' identity, honor, and reputation were still being shaped by those with whom he journeyed and with those whom he encountered.

Jesus was clearly in an early phase of his ministry. He had done some healing and teaching, called his first disciples, and had begun instructing them about God's realm. Now he is inviting them to join in God's mission of guiding all creation back into right relationship; to refocus their lives on what truly matters – that is, to actively participate in the ongoing revelation of God's realm in our midst. Although there was a gap between the kind of hospitality that Jesus expected and what he received, he did not wallow in self-pity or self-aggrandizement. Rather, he took notice of what was, and continued on the path that God had set before him – to make known the indiscriminate nature of God's love wherever he went and with whom all he encountered.

The disciples may have thought they were simply going to stop by and meet Jesus' family while traveling through Galilee. But it is likely that their rabbi had other plans in mind. This brief visit was an integral part of Jesus' teaching about hospitality, generosity, trust, and grace. Although, for generations, their shared culture had valued offering hospitality to strangers, Jesus viewed this particular encounter as an opportunity to expand

the disciples' understanding of hospitality – from that of being a gracious host, to that of being a gracious guest. At first, the disciples witnessed Jesus being graciously welcomed back into his hometown by those who heard his teaching in the synagogue. But almost as soon as the town folk praised Jesus for his wisdom and deeds of power, they turned on him with suspicion and rejection. Although his neighbors took offense at him, Jesus essentially turned the other cheek. He modeled for the disciples what he would call them to do next: to always be gracious, especially when others are not.

Without missing a beat, Jesus stayed focused on God's mission and commissioned the disciples to go out in the surrounding area and indiscriminately share God's love with all they encountered. In being sent out, two by two, Jesus was teaching them to be gracious guests, no matter what. He instructed them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. With loving and generous hearts, the disciples were to go out and share words of wisdom; to offer a healing touch; and to receive the hospitality of strangers. These ordinary, fresh-off-the-boat disciples were now being invited to put into practice what they had witnessed Jesus doing: to visit places where they could be welcomed, ignored, or rejected; and to share God's indiscriminate love with those whom you agree, and with those whom you disagree.

In a recent interview, theologian and United Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon commented that:

“We live in time that many say is divided. We live in a country that seems to have huge political divisions. . . [But] when was America united? When was America all one? . . . One reason America *felt* united when I was growing up was because there was only one group of us at the microphone talking, and we all agreed with each other, and everything was just fine for us.

Maybe division [in our country] is a positive sign that more people are coming to

the microphone; the diversity of America is being better recognized than it has before.¹

This reflection comes from a well-respected preacher and teacher whose denomination is currently struggling with its own internal divisions about the role of LBGTQ people in the church – not unlike the struggles The Episcopal Church has had over celebrating the diverse roles of women in the church. We occupy a beautiful but broken world. And yet, we are summoned to participate in the healing of the world by sharing in the indiscriminate hospitality of God.

Today, as we celebrate the founding of our nation, many continue to wrestle with the inconsistencies between our country's highest ideals, our history of cruelty and divisions, and our current reality. We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all human beings are created equal, and that all lives matter. And yet, our country's founders wrote into the Declaration of Independence disparaging language about the very people who had welcomed the first settlers onto the shores of their land; people who had shown hospitality to strangers by teaching them skills that helped them survive their first harsh winter in unfamiliar territory; people who had demonstrated their generosity by sharing wisdom about their system of government that ultimately helped shape American democracy:² – Native Peoples who had already established hundreds of nations on this continent, including the Powhatan, the Wampanoag, and the Iroquois Peoples.

Our nation was founded both in communion with our gracious and generous hosts, and tragically at their expense. Rather than proclaiming the unalienable rights of all people, colonizers falsely interpreted God's love to be highly selective; to believe that God intended Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness only for some, and not for all. Within a very short time those who had been graciously welcomed as guests betrayed their hosts by designating them as less than human, perpetrating genocide and stealing land. And yet,

¹ *A Conversation with Will Willimon, Theologian and United Methodist Bishop.* <https://video.azpbs.org/video/a-conversation-with-will-willimon-igqfmm/>

² <https://npr.org/2021/07/02/1012680822/examining-a-racist-passage-in-the-declaration-of-independence>

Jesus teaches us that we are “responsible to the laws of heaven . . . not the unjust laws of the land.”³

Bishop Willimon reminds us that “one of our great challenges as Christians is to realize that being a Christian is not synonymous with being an American. We live in this country and most of us love this country and have profited from it, and have enjoyed its gifts; however, being a Christian . . . doesn’t have to do with national loyalties or boundaries. It has to do with those who try to follow Jesus Christ and have been called by him.”⁴ It has to do with proclaiming the “indiscriminate nature of God’s love.”⁵

In her book, *The Church Cracked Open*, Stephanie Spellers reminds us that we “hurt each other, often without even trying. After the community has sustained some wound or injustice, a rift opens. The only way to make it right, and to knit the community back together, is through atonement . . . an act of spiritual sacrifice or reparation undertaken by an individual or group, almost as a gift to the community as a whole. This self-giving act shocks the conscience of the opponent so much it cracks them open and makes way for God’s spirit to intercede”⁶ – making a way out of no way.

The scandal of the Gospel is that Jesus makes a way out of no way. Even in the face of mockery, rejection, suffering and death, Jesus gives witness to the expansive and inclusive nature of God’s love. Although he may take note of our personal, communal, and cultural baggage, Jesus graciously invites us to lay aside our burdens, and witness to the indiscriminate hospitality of God.

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³ Stephanie Spellers. *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline and New Hope for Beloved Community*. Church Publishing, Inc. NY: New York (2021), 28.

⁴ *A Conversation with Will Willimon, Theologian and United Methodist Bishop*. <https://video.azpbs.org/video/a-conversation-with-will-willimon-igqfmm/>

⁵ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/rejection>

⁶ Stephanie Spellers. *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline and New Hope for Beloved Community*. Church Publishing, Inc. NY: New York (2021), 29.