

Sermon – July 4, 2021

“Let Go of Pandemic Stance”

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Scripture: Mark 6:1-13

I have to be honest, I'm not a happy camper. I'm not a sad camper, either, I'm just not much of a camper, I suppose. Camping feels unduly difficult to me. I like my creature comforts. Cozy bed. Refrigerator with fresh food. Electricity. Running water. I'll take the privacy of an indoor bathroom to openly doing my business in the woods. It's just... not my thing.

But, while I don't enjoy camping, I can appreciate that many people do. When you go camping, you have a list of necessities that you take with you. For some people, that list is longer than for others (imagine how long mine would be!), but the idea is to pack light, right? Your list might inform you to pack a flashlight, bug spray, food, a few changes of clothes, tent, sleeping bag, toothbrush, matches, a cup and plate, pocketknife... you know, camper stuff. You would not bring a lot of money or your electronics. You wouldn't take things that require power and you'd leave the fancy outfits at home. You'd leave behind, really, anything that could be a hindrance to your mission of having a positive camping experience. Presumably part of that experience involves communing with God's creation in all its splendor and anything superfluous, anything extra, well, that would just keep you from enjoying the great outdoors, right?

In our gospel reading for the day, Jesus gives the disciples their marching orders and basically, Jesus says, “Pack light.” Don't take anything you don't need. Leave behind your comforts and, interestingly, security. He says they make take a staff, which had a multitude of purposes including protection against robbers, snakes, and other creatures they may encounter on their travels. They were also to take one tunic, and their sandals. No money, no bread, no bag—which, in their time, may have been used for begging. They were to leave with only what they were wearing and a staff. Everything else, God would provide partly though the hospitality of those in whose cities they

visited. And since hospitality was one of the primary virtues in this region at this time and also something that could be expected by Jewish travelers of the Jewish people in any community with a Jewish presence, they'd be taken care of.

After giving them power to heal and instructions on how to travel, Jesus sends them off, two by two. These marching orders were intended to keep them moving, agile, and flexible. They would ensure that they never got too comfortable in any particular place and would be content with whatever their situation was, carrying easily with them all that they needed.

And Jesus's marching orders don't stop there. It wasn't just literal, physical baggage that Jesus instructs them to carry lightly, but also figurative baggage: he tells them to let things roll off their backs. We can't forget that they weren't going out into a world excited to have them. Even when in Jewish towns, they were in Roman occupied territory. They were under the thumb of empire not at all friendly to revolutionary ideas and people like Jesus of Nazareth. And even in his hometown, Jesus was met with opposition. It was by no means a forgone conclusion that the disciples would be overwhelmingly welcomed or successful simply because they're imbued with the power to do great and mighty things. And so, Jesus's instruction is intentional: Don't worry, he says, about those who will not listen to you, but shake off these slights and keep moving—the mission is more important than are these petty grievances. Teach, preach, heal, anoint, put an end to evil, and keep moving forward.

This instruction to just, in the words of the great and powerful Taylor Swift, "Shake it Off," is a good one in theory, but a difficult one to practice, isn't it? How often do we look at the enormity of the challenges we and the world face on any given day and get overwhelmed? It can be hard to look past slights committed against us. It can be hard to even get going when things seem so impossibly bad. Look at the news on any given day and you could easily be overwhelmed to the point of metaphorical paralysis thinking nothing you do could even make a dent in the vast injustice, pain, suffering, violence, and other horrific happenings in our world.

When things are hard, when we're overwhelmed, when we feel hopelessness and despair, it's not just difficult for us to handle emotionally... but physically as well. We carry ourselves differently. I'm a big, big fan of the comics of Charles Schultz about the Peanuts gang, often centered on either Charlie Brown or Snoopy. You will hear more than one sermon in which I mention a comic or two. I have an entire book called, "The Parables of Peanuts," and if you come to my house, you'll see some Peanuts memorabilia here and there.

As I meditated on and researched our scriptures this week, I was reminded of one of the more memorable comic strips, (shown here), in which Charlie Brown is walking kind of hunched over, head down with a sad-sack look on his face and says, "This is my 'Depressed stance... when you're depressed,'" he says, "It makes a lot of difference how you stand. The worst thing you can do is straighten up and hold your head high, because then you'll start to feel better... if you're going to get any joy out of being depressed, you've got to stand like this."

And there's some truth to what Charlie Brown says here. When we feel down or depressed or overcome by the enormity of the struggles that surround us, it's easy to take on this depressed stance and tempting to remain there. It's comfortable. There's a familiarity in that feeling and a comfort in knowing that if you're already down, you can't get down much further. It's one of the things that perpetuates it, actually. I can remember times when I just didn't think anything would help, so I tried nothing. I'm always going to be here, I thought, so I may as well live into it. I might as well just hunch over and really get into that depressed stance because this is my life now. If I just live here, I won't be disappointed when the next struggle or catastrophe presents itself. If you always expect the worst and you never try to make it better, you won't be let down and you won't fail.

Even when things begin to seem a bit better, sometimes we're reluctant to believe it aren't we? Here we are, coming out of this pandemic, and things still feel hard for some of us. We've gotten comfortable with where we are. We worry that if we get too excited or let that hope seep in, we might be setting ourselves up for a letdown. I'm very hopeful

that Donna will be able to come over here soon, but it feels like too much hope and the rug may be pulled out from under us again. We can take off our masks most places, especially if we're vaccinated, but are we really safe?

Right now, no one could blame any of us for feeling stuck or even for wallowing in the stuckness that comes with the times in which we live. The last 18 or so months have put us into a bit of a "pandemic stance," which does indeed resemble Charlie Brown's depressed stance. It's always going to be like this, we might think. We'll never really be over this, we'll say. And yet, friends, we have a different template to follow. Because our lives have not always been this. They will not forever be this and we do not need to forever remain in this pandemic, depressed stance.

As he did with the twelve in this scripture, Jesus invites us to let go of that stance. To shake the dust of the past 18 months off our sandals and to keep moving. Life goes on, but we must make the choice about whether to remain in our pandemic stance or to hold our heads high and get on with the business of living, of loving God and loving our neighbors.

Because, you see, it's not just in our personal lives that "pandemic, depressed stance" seeps in. If you've been paying any attention to recent news about communities of faith in 2021, you may notice that many churches are facing challenges in coming out of this pandemic. And, actually, most of us were struggling even before this. It's tempting to see declining attendance and get discouraged. And that discouragement is understandable. But the problem with that discouragement is that it can lend itself to a depressed stance in our ministry. And a depressed stance isn't a good look for a community of hope. A depressed stance becomes a stale ministry and is precisely the opposite of what Jesus is commanding of the disciples in this passage.

Charlie Brown says it's hard to get any of the joy out of depression when we hold our heads high. And, my friends, we have reason to hold our heads high because we do not walk this difficult path alone. Not in life and not in ministry.

We don't need to remain in this "pandemic stance." When we're done walking like Charlie Brown in our depressed stance, we can begin to look toward brighter days. But maybe we're worried about being letdown. Maybe, as the saying goes, we don't want to get our hopes up.

And yet, what is one of the most often written phrases in scripture? Do not be afraid. Do not worry. Joshua 1:9: Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go. It goes all the way back to Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, the Prophets, the Psalms, Jesus, himself repeatedly, all throughout scripture we are told to be not afraid, but to keep going.

The problem, of course, is that we are human and will worry, we will be afraid sometimes. I fully recognize that there are some of us who, for biological reasons, cannot just "get on with it." For some of us, it's not as simple as holding our heads high. Sometimes, I'm even one of those people. Holding my head high on a bad day seems preposterous. And we are not defective people or of less worth and value because we struggle with our mental health.

But, brain chemistry aside: what Jesus shows us here is that we cannot get bogged down or stuck in this mindset that there's nothing we can do and that our world and our churches will *a/ways* be this way. That's not packing light. That's like going on a camping trip and taking everything but the kitchen sink with you. That's like going on a camping trip packing like Pastor Jessica! We must lighten our load, my friends. Sure, if we let them, things can always be the way they are right now.

But they don't have to be. Jesus doesn't tell the twelve to continue pushing when they are not welcomed and not listened to, he tells them to move on. He doesn't ask them to continue trying to stick a square peg in a round hole, he says take your square peg and move onward to find the place where it fits. And the disciples do just that. Verse 12-13 says, "They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them." They did not get

bogged down in depressed stance when things didn't work out as they hoped, they shook the dust from their sandals and kept going.

So put away your depressed stance, Charlie Browns, now is the time to hold your head up because good days are still ahead. This community is vibrant and alive and the Spirit of the living God is moving among and within us. We need only shake off the dust of the past 18+ months and keep going.

Onward.

Amen.