

July 7 Sermon

Texts: Psalm 121; Mark 6:1-13

“Resilience”

The power of negative thinking! In the Old Testament Nehemiah’s reverence for God and compassion for his people gave him the ability to reject anything that would hinder his progress. His assurance of God’s spirit on him deterred him from distractions and the negativity he is feeling all around him. Nehemiah’s enemies tried to scare him into ceasing the work of building the wall, but he was not going to change his mind. “For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, ‘Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.’ But now, O God, strengthen my hands.”
Nehemiah 6:9

Despite all the negativity around them, let the faithful pilgrims in Psalm 123 feel themselves to be the objects of scorn and contempt from the unfaithful in Israel or from the unbelieving Gentiles among whom they must pass. They pray to God for safe journey and continue their mission with resiliency and perseverance.

When Jesus spoke, it says, “many were astounded. They said, ‘where did this man get all of this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him?’” That initial response feels positive and open.

But then there is an obvious shift in the reception of Jesus, and it becomes very negative, moving toward rejection: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon? . . . And they took offense at him.”

And then we have that memorable verse – words from Jesus that reflect reality and sadness, and his sense of rejection: “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And it says, “. . . he was amazed at their unbelief.”

Jesus came to his own hometown, to his own people, even to his own family members, . . . and he was amazed at their unbelief. The gospel of John says it like this: “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” (John 1:11)

There seems to be an issue, a complexity, in knowing and being related to Jesus, . . . and following Jesus. There seems to be almost a barrier between proximity to Jesus . . . and becoming what Jesus calls us to be – he came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. Did they forget who Jesus was? Did they care?

You know Bruce Springsteen. One of Springsteen’s most familiar hits is entitled, “My Hometown.” It’s about driving down the streets of town with his father, who would tussle his hair and say, “take a good look around – this is your hometown.” But the song shifts and names tensions and racial violence – troubled

times had come to his “hometown.” The song resonates so well because most of us have a sense of home, and hometown. Hometown is nice and nostalgic. But hometown can be complicated too.

Jesus shows an amazing RESILIENCY, PESEVERANCE, even when he is rejected, even as he finds discouragement among his own people. And Jesus calls us to RESILIENCY in discipleship.

It says Jesus “went about among the villages teaching.” He was NOT going to be trapped by the rejection or the failure.

He was NOT going to be discouraged by his hometown and their limits on him.

He was NOT going to be beaten down by their unbelief. “

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two.” Jesus gave them – flawed as the disciples were – “the authority” that he had – authority over unclean spirits, authority to heal and cast out demons, authority to cleanse and cure. Jesus dares – flawed as they were – to commission them out to promote the love of God.

And this is where another word comes to us...RESILIENCY comes in. RESILIENCY is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; RESILIENCY means an elasticity, an ability to bounce back and carry on.

Jesus shows an amazing RESILIENCY, even when he is rejected, even as he finds discouragement among his own people. And Jesus calls us to RESILIENCY in discipleship.

It says Jesus “went about among the villages teaching.”

He was NOT going to be trapped by the rejection or the failure.

He was NOT going to be discouraged by his hometown and their limits on him.

He was NOT going to be beaten down by their unbelief. “

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two.” Jesus gave them – flawed as the disciples were – “the authority” that he had – authority over unclean spirits, authority to heal and cast out demons, authority to cleanse and cure. Jesus dares – flawed as they were – to commission them out to promote the love and healing, the redemption and hope of God’s reign. He did not just say go – go on your own power, try your best. He gave them his authority, his presence and power.

Jesus also said, “take nothing with you: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts.” They were to rely on God.

REMEMBER: the goal is always two-fold: to trust God more and more, and to serve God with our lives.

It is so easy to get so caught up in the whirlwinds that encircle us. We fret over what might happen to our stuff, our reputation, our standing, our children, our ideology and our investments, our nation and world; and in the process we forget that our lives always belong to God, and we are called to go, and to serve God.

Despite all the negativity around them, let the faithful pilgrims in Psalm 123 feel themselves to be the objects of scorn and contempt from the unfaithful in Israel or from the unbelieving Gentiles among whom they must pass. They pray to God for safe journey and continue their mission with resiliency and perseverance. Amen

It is not by sheer will that we become brave, that we shift from successful in the world's eyes to significant in serving God. This takes a constant reformation of our hearts. God does not call us to simply TRY to be brave, but to TRAIN to be brave. We will not arrive at it tomorrow, but hopefully by the grace of God, we will be more brave and more faithful, more trusting and more serving as we keep working on it.

Again, it is about our RESILIENCY, our on-going commitment to be transformed as God's faithful disciples.

Some of you know the name William Sloan Coffin. The last book that Coffin wrote before he died was a fictitious book entitled, Letters to a Young Doubter, in which he engaged a bright college-student in an exchange of letters across a school year. This book gave Coffin a forum to talk about problems of faith, difficulties in personal life, and other issues. Throughout the book, Coffin keeps urging the young man to "seek the common good rather than personal gain; to strive to be valuable, rather than successful, and to make a difference, not money." All through his own life, Coffin was too aware that unless we define ourselves by certain values, the world will quickly define us by its values.

As the book unfolds, the student writes that he may take a job as a lifeguard at a suburban swimming pool in order "to make money to buy a car." Coffin replies with some stern words: "I suggest you inscribe on the soft places of your heart these words - 'the primary reward for human toil is not what you get for it, but what you become by it.' As a suburban lifeguard you may become a car owner and even a bit more charming. But what else" will you become? . . . "Remember that the greatest perils to the planet arise not from the poor and ignorant for whom education is the answer; they are caused by the well-educated for whom self-interest is the problem. . . be sure that as you grow and learn, you are more and more concerned about your neighbor's needs" (p.145).

Jesus calls us to be RESILIENT, especially as we seek to be formed, not in the ways of the world, but in the ways of trusting God and serving God.

To quote Coffin again – too many people have God frequently in their mouths, but not so frequently in their hearts. Instead of justifying our actions with godly talk, we should prove ourselves faithful with godly actions. We should express ourselves as fearless, vulnerable, dedicated, joyous followers of our Risen Lord (p. 174).

The most-sacred symbol in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is a tree: a sprawling, shade-bearing, 80-year-old American Elm. Tourists drive from miles around to see her. People pose for pictures beneath her. Arborists carefully protect her. She adorns posters and letterhead. Other trees grow larger, fuller—even greener. But not one is equally cherished. The city treasures the tree not because of her appearance, but her endurance.

She endured the Oklahoma City bombing.

Timothy McVeigh parked his death-laden truck only yards from her. His malice killed 168 people, wounded 850, destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, and buried the tree in rubble. No one expected it to survive. No one, in fact, gave any thought to the dusty, branch-stripped tree.

But then she began to bud.

Sprouts pressed through damaged bark; green leaves pushed away gray soot. Life resurrected from an acre of death. People noticed. The tree modeled the resilience the victims desired. So, they gave the elm a name: the Survivor Tree. A resilient tree thrives! A resilient people, we thrive!

Jesus seeks RESILIENCY in the making of disciples. HE SHOWED RESILIENCY EVEN TO THE END, ON THE CROSS, CALVARY'S TREE! May God's Spirit and grace so cover us that we are gifted and guided us in the ways of trusting God and serving God. Amen.