

“Freed From the Need to Succeed”
Based on Mark 6:1-13
© Stacey Steck
Preached at San José, Costa Rica, July 9, 2006

Let’s talk about coercion, shall we? It’s not a pleasant topic, but an important one. The English word “coerce” comes from Latin roots meaning to “shut up” or “to enclose,” and ironically those same Latin roots gave birth to the English word “ark,” as in Noah’s ark or the Ark of the Covenant, both containers that held valuable cargo for our spiritual ancestors. The same may be said for the results of acts of coercion, that enclosed in episodes of violence, force, and compulsion are the hearts, minds, and indeed the very souls of those coerced, valuable cargo in the sight of God to be sure, imprisoned by power wielded unjustly or unwisely or unconsciously.

To dispense quickly with the part of our story that deals with Jesus’ visit to his hometown, let us just say that people usually don’t accept change very well, even when that change is in their best interest. After the amazement of hearing great wisdom pour from his mouth wears off, the forces of coercion set in and they effectively shut Jesus up, enclosing him in a social box the size and shape of Nazareth, using the power of the community to make sure that he cannot be taken seriously. It is to his credit that he even bothered to cure the few sick people that he did for the reception, however predictable it may have been, that he received. The subtle, unspoken rules of families, and communities, and dare I say churches, are

powerful boundaries which can prevent even the most necessary and graceful changes from taking place. More on that later.

A different kind of coercion is the subtext of the second half of tonight's story in Mark. In this episode, we see the beginning of our own ministry here at ECF, the first sending of ordinary people to do extraordinary things, a tradition which continues to this day. These regular folks, sent out two by two, are armed with unspeakable power – the double-barreled combination of authority over unclean spirits, and the ability to cure the sick – but they carry what is potentially an even more dangerous weapon: the name of Jesus Christ. For those who have never considered the name of Christ as a deadly weapon, feel free to consult the section of your encyclopedia that details the Great Crusades. That awful episode better left for your leisure time reading, tonight's story contains for us a warning about the potential for coercion, and an lesson on how to avoid it, that we would do well to heed as we seek to carry on the noble and graceful work of our Savior here in Paradise. You see, contained in the power to exorcise demons and heal grave infirmities in the name of Jesus Christ is the enormous temptation and opportunity to coerce and manipulate those we seek to serve, to do damage to the hearts, minds, and indeed the very souls of those we most want to reach with messages of hope and healing. People who are vulnerable in mind, body, and spirit are not only people who most need what Christ has to offer. They are also those we can most

easily take advantage of, if we are neither wise nor self-reflective about our motives and our methods.

A deeper look at the story will illustrate what I am talking about. The people to whom Jesus sends out the twelve are most certainly classified as vulnerable in mind, body, and spirit. In your encyclopedias (or today's newspaper), see the listings for war and occupied territories. You will recall that around about 63 BC, the Romans booted out the competition once and for all and established a permanent presence in the Near East, including the territory formerly known as the promised land. Despite Greco-Roman contributions to ideas about democracy, the Roman Empire was anything but a democracy, especially if you were not a citizen of the Empire, which Jesus and his compatriots most certainly were not. Lofty Roman virtues aside, the fact of the matter was that the occupied peoples were second class citizens, and were treated as such, which is to say, harshly enough to keep them under control but not so brutally that it spurred revolution. We need look no further than the next passage in Mark to see how things played out. In that story, we hear about the summary execution of John the Baptist for criticizing the marital antics of King Herod. An earlier Herod, we are told, killed every child under the age of two in the region of Bethlehem to try to catch the young Jesus in his net of genocide. Pontius Pilate the governor, we learn from other writers of the time, was a very brutal man, inflicting his bad temper on the populace in particularly violent ways. Later Emperors famously sent Christians and slaves to

the lions. The taxation system was oppressive, and thus poverty was rampant, there was an environment of tension and violence with soldiers constantly at the ready, and, we might easily imagine, there was abuse of prisoners, kangaroo courts, disappeared persons, and all the other things that go along with the unjust occupation of a territory. And that is not even mentioning death by crucifixion. You get the picture.

It is into this context that Jesus sends his disciples two by two with a message of hope. This by itself is not so surprising. Into such a climate of fear, hope is a welcome message and one we would expect from the God of hope. Christ sends the disciples with a message of grace: the kingdom of God is close at hand, and it is a kingdom far different than what you are experiencing right now! But what I want you to consider is that the packaging of the message of grace packed almost as much wallop as its contents, that the way the message was brought may have been the real evidence of the nearness of the Kingdom.

How does Jesus send out his missionaries? Without much: no bread, no bag, and no money, one pair of shoes, no extra change of clothes, but, at least, a walking stick. While it's true that these marching orders would have freed from attachments to the more material creature comforts, and thus freed the disciples to concentrate fully on the task at hand, I think Jesus may have had something even more countercultural, and dare I say political, in mind. Again, we find this clue in the context. In the midst of extreme poverty, there would have been no shortage of

people trying to make a quick buck, offering remedies and solutions at great price, stealing whatever was not nailed down, and doing all the other things people do to try to survive. It was a culture in which something was always being taken from them: their possessions, their family members, their dignity. It was a climate ripe for coercion and manipulation from within as well as from without.

In the context of this survival existence, the command to go out to preach and heal with almost nothing must have seemed doubly strange. But it is, I think, related to the ways of divine foolishness and role reversal described elsewhere in the Gospels: walk the extra mile, turn the other cheek, give your tunic as well as your cloak. By prohibiting even the essentials, Jesus sends out his disciples in the midst of these poor places that they might do the unexpected and seek hospitality from the poor, a genuine, non-coerced hospitality, the kind which they had always been expected to offer as members of the chosen people. You will remember that there existed a sort of law of the desert law for receiving guests, and it was virtually mandatory that you made provision for the stray traveler, whether they be friend or foe. It made sense; one day you too might find yourself far from home and needing a meal and a place to lay your weary head. Under the Roman occupation, there was no opportunity to practice this ancient art, no way to demonstrate largesse and honor and dignity. Everybody had to look out for themselves. On one hand we might be inclined to think that sending the disciples out as veritable beggars would only burden these poor folk even further, but

paradoxically Jesus knew that human dignity has a far greater value than a loaf of bread.

In this respect, Jesus is being distinctly anti-empire. When the Romans come knocking at your door, they are looking to take something, at the very least your bed for the evening and the food in your larder. They are depending on the fact that your hunger and your fear will more strongly motivate your behavior than your dignity. When the disciples come knocking they are there to share something, not take it. What they have to offer may only have been a message, but it was a message brought without the expectation of receiving something in return, except perhaps the expected hospitality. A person who could do healings and drive out demons could probably make a lot of money in those days, even from the poor. But here are people doing it for free, and offering the opportunity to reclaim that most basic gift of God, their dignity. The disciples have something very valuable to offer. But if they had stayed apart in a cloistered environment, ate by themselves, and played the part of noble do-gooders, they would have lost the opportunity to experience more deeply the beloved community and to offer a chance for human dignity to surface. By intentionally exhibiting the interdependence that defines the human experience of the fullness of the Kingdom, they showed that the Empire did not have the last word, but that the reign of God still did exist.

The other way the disciples were the message was what happened when they were rejected, an experience we might imagine was common considering how

jaded the people must have been after so many years of occupation. Jesus tells the disciples to shake the dust off of their feet, a practice that had to do with making sure you carried with you nothing of that place as you went on your way, a sign that you were leaving behind inhospitableness, rudeness, or whatever other negative thing you had experienced, and was a symbolic gesture seeking God's judgment on the offending household. But even this harsh action, requesting doom and gloom to come upon the refusing place, was a graceful action given the context. You see, even if shaking one's feet of their dust is a sign asking God's condemnation, at least it is asking *God* to take care of the justice rather than taking matters into your own hands, as the Romans were apt to do. Refusing the Romans was something you did at your own peril. We are not the Romans, the disciples then say with their clean feet; you will have to face your God for what you have done, but you won't be receiving retribution from us. You see, shaking the dust off our feet was not a sign of failure, but rather maturity, not only because they recognized the limits of their abilities, but because they had not turned to retribution. Even those who rejected the message received a message of grace.

This is what Jesus and his disciples were up against as they made their way around the villages of Galilee: gripping fear, grinding poverty, their hearts, minds, and souls shut up in a coercive Imperial box. Some responded to the possibilities for change and some did not. But all received the gospel because the message was shared without manipulation, and without coercion even when the answer was no.

Friends, our God is not a coercive God, despite our desire that it all might share the faith we experience. Yes, our God judges, and our God punishes, and our God laments and grieves when the invitation of Jesus Christ is refused or rejected, but our God is never coercive. God doesn't torture, or humiliate, or say, "Off with his head," every time someone says no to the Gospel. Instead, God uses us to plant seeds by sending us out to be the message as well as to carry it, to preach grace, but also to embody it, to offer healing but also to be a healing presence even when healing doesn't take place. The way to faithfully be the message is to go about our life and ministry in a way that makes a marked contrast to whatever forms of coercion and manipulation are the order of the day. That means doing away with our pity, our sense of noblesse oblige, and most of all our trying too hard.

And while this is quite true in our ministry sharing the Gospel, it may be perhaps more important in all the relationships which make up our lives, as we are faced with the challenge of controlling whatever coercive power we possess, and I think we all have some. Some of us have it economically, some physically, some emotionally. We all wield it for reasons, and in ways, we don't often understand. We wield it when we want someone to do what *we* want them to do, not necessarily what is best for them. We wield it when we are afraid of being left alone. We wield it when we are trying to escape pain. We wield it when we are challenged to grow and change.

But how authentic can coerced faith, or coerced behavior, be? Consider the ridiculous attempts by various religions, including Christianity, to require that the inhabitants of a certain area “convert” to Christianity. How wholeheartedly and genuinely can you respond to the Gospel with a sword at your neck? The same is true, alas, with teenagers, not all of whom are ready to embrace the faith of their parents, but who are compelled, occasionally with threats of punishment, to attend church. Sure, we all want them to be there but at what price? An ever-growing resentment that will distance them from the church for years to come? And what about in all of our relationships, when people change and grow and we feel threatened by that? Do we keep grinding until we wear that person down? As in Jesus’ hometown, the coercive rules our families, and communities and sometimes even churches employ to keep us in comforting and predictable, if not very empowering, relationships, are not always enforced as the result of bad intentions, but often because the fear of what we don’t know is so much greater than that of what we do know, even if what we know is profoundly painful and desperately needs to be changed.

Like Paul’s inability to enter Asia, by the activity of the Holy Spirit, we are not always supposed to reach the destination to which *we* believe we must go. And whether this is by God’s design or the willfulness of stubborn family and friends, makes no real difference. You see, if we persist in seeking to do something we ought not to be doing, we will only damage ourselves and our efforts on behalf of

the kingdom. We will either turn to violence, or resentment, or coercion, or self-pity, or withdrawal, or emotional manipulation, or a hundred other less mature reactions to rejection than the mature response to move on without regret, knowing we have given it our best, and trusting God to do the rest. In these cases, the desire to see the mission through at all costs, to succeed, to convince others of the rightness of our position, to get them to behave like we think they should, is our desire, not God's, and therefore the methods we use will no longer be God, but our own.

With God's grace, we are freed from the need to succeed, to impose our will on others, and from there we are able to embrace life and other people for whom and what they are: gifts of God for the people of God. May we all grow in the maturity that helps us to let go and let God. Amen.