

“Joyful Urgency”
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My imagination was captured, this week, by Eugene Peterson’s translation in The Message of today’s Gospel text from Mark 6. Dave read it for us all from The Message. More specifically, the refrain I heard all week was: “they preached with joyful urgency that life can be radically different.” Joyful. Urgency. Radically. Different. I don’t know about you, but I long for life to be radically different. I long for God’s upside down, inside out way of shalom peace to come on earth as it is in heaven. I long for wrongs to be made right. I long for that day when there is true good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, when the oppressed are made free. I long for the day when both our communities and our lives reflect what is good and what God requires: justice, mercy, and humility before God.

I was also struck by this language of the disciples preaching with joyful urgency. Such a lovely phrase. Urgency that is joyful. What do you have a sense of urgency about in your life? I have some urgency around making sure our bills are paid on time. Getting to the grocery store before the traffic picks up around the weekend. When Micah came home from Camp Arrowhead this week, he and I both had an incredible sense of urgency around checking him for ticks. We still don’t have internet at our new townhome. There has been an urgency in our family about that. . . Let me tell you, it hasn’t been joyful.

The disciples are joyfully urgent in the witness and work that Jesus has commissioned them for. The good news that they are sharing, is utterly transformational. People are being healed—physically and spiritually. They are being set free from demon possession. Their lives are being made radically different. Wow! I imagine this might have been a bit exhilarating for the disciples. To be making such a profound impact in the lives of those they are encountering. Wouldn’t we like to say that Westminster is partnering with God in this kind of work! I know there was tremendous exhilaration last summer when Westminster came together in partnership with RIP Medical Debt and raised enough money to wipe out \$1.6 million of Delawareans’ unpaid personal medical bills that had gone to collection. Those who were the recipient of this medical debt relief wrote beautiful notes of gratitude about how this made their lives radically different.

There is an expansiveness about the good news that Jesus has inaugurated and the disciples are being brought into. The way of God, God’s shalom, God’s reign, will always encounter opposition and confusion, but it will also find hospitable welcome in places where it brings healing and wholeness. I find that so inspiring. So encouraging. So hopeful. I am beginning to understand a bit of the joy that must have been animating those disciples.

But what about that urgency? Friends, are you and I, as followers of Jesus, is Westminster Presbyterian Church, as a faith community, urgent about our calling to share with others that living a new way is possible? Do we feel, as an example, an urgency to do outreach? Generally, I think we could both individually and collectively confess to our urgency being centered inwardly—like my example of the ways urgency shows up in my life and my family. Too often those of us in the church center our urgency on things like church finances, church membership numbers, personal preferences for how a worship service or the church bulletin is designed or what the building looks like—paint colors, pews vs. chairs, and things like that. How far off the mark such “urgencies” are to that of these commissioned disciples?! Lord, forgive us!

What brought about this appropriately tuned, joyful urgency in the disciples? Let’s really consider this for a moment. Looking at the text, you might feel like I’m asking a question to which the text gives us no clues. But I want to draw our attention to some of the clues in the text that may help us think deeply about what created this joyful urgency to share the good news.

Jesus sent out the disciples with authority and power to preach and heal but, as we hear it in the NRSV, without money, extra clothes, or food. How interesting! These are the very things we so often have an urgency about. These are also the things that make for power in the world. These are the resources that separate the haves from the have nots, that allow some to profit at the expense of others who are just trying to make it, to survive.

Jesus wants us to share the good news—to witness with our lives and our words, to bring healing and wholeness to those who would welcome the change to live a radically different life. But I also think that Jesus was acutely aware of the fact that we are all liable to getting swept up in non-urgent urgencies that take us away not only from our true selves but also to the work that God is up to in the world—the work that God would make us partners in.

In the Christian contemplative tradition, there are deep schools of wisdom that teach about the ways our minds get hooked on imagined dramas and react from insecurity, which distracts us from remaining aware of our True selves, our deeper awareness, our commitment to living out our calling as Christians in the world. Our egos would like to keep us always busy and occupied—it is what is known as “the False Self in Action.” This is when our egos are in a constant state of reacting to our three emotional programs for happiness. The first emotional program for happiness is our need for power and control. The second is our need for esteem and affection. The third is our need for security and survival. Aha! Now there’s some urgency that I can make sense of. And I think maybe you can too. If we stop and think about it, these emotional programs are often what run our lives—much of it unconsciously—what set the agenda for what we find to be urgent, or whether we are joyful or not.

Now here’s the thing. Christian contemplative teaching says that it is not necessarily harmful to act from these places. There is a place for these so-called emotional programs for happiness to function in our lives. They keep us alive; they keep us focused on our very real human needs and desires. The harm comes when we act from these places

unconsciously. When we are not aware, for example, that our need for power and control is operating in a situation, or our need for esteem and affection, or security and survival, that is when we begin to operate from hidden agendas. That is when our False Self takes over and who we truly are, in inner selves, who God created us to be, in God's image, is set aside. When the False Self operates, we are unable to enter our calling to witness to God's way with any kind of joyful urgency.

There is something very interesting, very human about Jesus' own reception in his hometown. To put it bluntly: Jesus' work in his hometown failed. His disciples were witnesses to that failure. Yes, he was able to heal a few folks, but that's all. Jesus' own very real humanity can be felt in his response. He's fed up with their stubbornness. On the heels of his rejection, he has to retool. So, he sends others out to do the work. He may have needed to regroup and recenter himself. I'd like to think that Jesus had some insight into his own human needs for power and control, esteem and affection, security and survival. So, he didn't begin to manipulate people for praise or affection from a sense of narcissistic arrogance rather than genuine relationship. He may have been tempted to—but knowing the unbroken relationship of utter dependency that Jesus had with God, he didn't give into that temptation. Instead, he made the healthy decision to live authentically rather than to play games. So, he brought others into the work he was doing. Jesus didn't go it alone. He shared his power.

I think Jesus was wise enough to the emotional programs for happiness always operating in us, that he provided some help to keep his disciples focused on making good decisions—to act out of emotional health so that there could be space for joyful urgency around the transformation in others' lives. You see, Jesus sent them out with authority to participate in God's transformative work, but this transformative authority was expressed specifically in powerlessness, dependency, and relationship. Those disciples were not sent out with all the trappings of abundant resources, self-sufficiency, and a self at the center. Instead, they are sent out to work together—mutually dependent on the one they are with, with only the necessities for food, clothing, money, and lodgings, and with a deep humility about their work rather than an ego-driven bravado about what they have to give to others.

Church—let me speak plainly—it is very easy for our emotional programs for happiness to be at work in the life of a church. When this happens, we often find that church decisions are made in order to try to keep people happy rather than to focus on our calling to share the good news with others. When this happens, personal preferences, fear of change, and an atmosphere of negativity are dominant rather than a joyful urgency around joining in God's work of transformation in the community around us. When this happens, we forsake the authority God has empowered us with to preach and heal and instead focus on hoarding power for our comfort and desire to make church the way we want it to be.

It is my deep prayer and desire that all of us at Westminster would come together in mutual dependency on one another, to live into our calling to share the good news, to reach into community, with joyful urgency. May God show us the way to walk with others as we seek a life made radically different by God's way coming on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.