

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
July 8, 2012**

Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell

“Traveling Light”

Text- Mark 6: 1-13

I know that some in this parish have lived their whole lives in Galena. Perhaps they went away to college but then returned. Others of us are transplants. We left our hometowns. And maybe we have experienced both the joy and the challenge of going back home. You know what they say. “You can’t go home again.”

Since my parents died, I don’t get back to my hometown often—mostly just for big events like family weddings and funerals. I have always been astonished when I return that the fact that I am a mother and professional, educated, and reasonably accomplished doesn’t seem to matter for some. I am remembered as Pat and Ray’s oldest daughter, the little girl who, one hot Memorial Day during the Baptist preacher’s long sermon staggered to the front of the marching band and dramatically fainted on right on top of her saxophone And they probably remembered a lot of other things that I would rather not go into here.

I had the opportunity to preach a few times in that hometown—at the Congregational Church where I grew up, went to Sunday School and youth group, and sang in the choir and also at the Lutheran Church down the street. I remember looking out at the congregation and seeing not only friends and family but former teachers. There was Mrs. Danielson, for example, my teacher for both English and French, a woman who spoke with perfect diction and grammar. There in the pulpit, all I could think about were my split infinitives and dangling participles.

Those of us who return home now and again may find some similarities with how the people of Nazareth received Jesus on that day that he went back to teach in the synagogue. To a large extent, it was their preconceived notions about Jesus and his roots that prevented them from hearing him.

Oh, they started out in a way that seemed to be open to his message. They came to hear him, for one thing. But who knows—that may have been more about wanting to check him out—to see for themselves what he was like after hearing about his healing miracles and the crowds that had been gathering about him throughout the Galilee. And, initially, they were impressed: Mark says that they were astonished, wondering where his wisdom came from. But in the twinkling of an eye, their astonishment shifted and they became offended, scandalized. Perhaps they were remembering him as the little boy who played with their own sons in the village, the young man who worked with his hands in Joseph’s carpentry shop. Perhaps they were astounded by his audacity, daring to teach in their synagogue as though he were some-one special! Or maybe they disapproved of his going off on his own, being different—not behaving like an eldest son should in that time and place, not taking care of his widowed mother and the rest of the family. Whatever they thought, it was not affirming. Mark gives us a hint of their scorn: they identified him as the son of Mary. No one, in Jesus’ time, referred to someone’s lineage in terms of their mother. It was an out and out insult—a questioning of his parentage, his legitimacy. Can’t you just hear the whispers? You know—“there was some funny

business with Mary and Joseph's betrothal...never quite sure if the child was his!" "Who does he think he is, anyway?"

I wonder if, deep down inside, Jesus had hoped to make a good impression on those old friends from Nazareth. Hoped to have them admire him and accept who he had become. I wonder if it hurt him to be rejected by those who had known him all of his life. But he did not try to persuade them, to win them over. He simply said that prophets are without honor in their hometowns and moved on to another village, unable to do miracles amongst those who would not receive him. He took this experience of rejection with him, continued with his work, and began to equip the disciples to carry on his ministry.

I expect that the part of the story about the disciples being sent out makes some of us a bit nervous. It is truly about evangelism, that "e" word that has come, in our time, to represent a kind of testimony of faith that is about converting others, about claiming to possess a single Truth (with a capital "T") that everyone needs to accept. Here are these disciples, going out from village to village in pairs, knocking on the doors of strangers, saying, "We are here to teach you. By the way, we are going to need a place to stay and some food to eat. We might stay a few days or a week or more. We have nothing—no money, no extra clothing, no food. Please take us in." Sounds a little like the missionaries who go from door to door with their religious tracts—though they are usually very nicely dressed, and, as far as I know, don't ask to come live with you. Still, there is a resemblance to those missionaries that I tend to hide from when I see them strolling down the sidewalks in my neighborhood. The ones who have made us afraid to talk about our faith for fear of being mistaken for one of them!

It might be helpful to recall that in Jesus' time, there were a number of itinerant preachers and magicians who wandered around the ancient world. Some were out and out charlatans and "false prophets" who were clearly out for their own gain. Perhaps the disciples "traveled light" carrying no possessions as a way of showing that they were different—that they had a real message to share, not just a bag of tricks that would make them some money. And it seems that they "traveled light" with their message, too. Remember what Jesus told them? "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." They were not to argue or try to impose their beliefs on those who were not receptive—they were to move on to others who *were ready* to listen. No strong-arm tactics. No guilt trips.

So, how *do* we share our faith? How do we talk about its importance in our lives and in how we live our lives? Or do we? For years now, the religious right has dominated the public face of Christianity. I think we can all recognize that the very term "Christian" has been appropriated by those with a particular point of view—one that I believe is not consistent with the Gospel message. This gives a very slanted view to the world at large of what it means to be a Christian. It is no wonder so many people today are turned off by religion and the idea of being part of a church! We do need to learn to speak out—not by proselytizing or insisting that others believe as we do, but by telling our stories—our authentic experiences that have formed our faith and informed how we live in this world. And by inviting others to share their stories.

This past week, as I have been preparing for my teaching week at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, I have gone back to some of my files from my own doctoral studies where my thesis involved in-depth studies of two churches that had come near the point of closing their doors but then became revitalized. My study was to try to tease out the factors that have led to this new vitality. There are stories from these churches that have stayed with me—I have told them more than once.

Now you might think that a strong evangelism thrust made the difference. And, indeed, the churches did do some things—one distributes thousands of fliers three times a year to announce the seasonal worship services and activities. Both sponsor neighborhood events like street fairs or block parties and special worship that might appeal to those who are not church members. The Pet Blessings each fall are huge!

But it is interesting that people I interviewed at both churches were ambivalent about the idea of evangelism. For the same reasons I have mentioned—fear of being seen as imposing their beliefs on others, of holding rigid views on who is “in” and who is “out.” And they were not at all interested in anything that smacks of “conversion.” But something has happened in these churches. These people came to a real sense of clarity about the Gospel message of loving God and neighbor, of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger. They developed a strong sense of identity as communities of faith and an understanding of where they might fit, both individually and as communities, in carrying out the Gospel mission. They understand that what they have to offer is sorely needed in our world. And they share that message— not by knocking on doors or handing out tracts—but by being so excited about their faith and about their church community that they can’t help but share it with others —gently and lightly.

Sometimes we are so afraid of being mistaken for those who espouse one Truth (with a capital “t”) that we go to the other end of the spectrum where anything goes. Then we wonder just what it is that we believe and stand for. Unfortunately, this is not a true/false test. Not even multiple choice with one choice that is “all of the above.” It takes hard work—and that’s what these two churches did.

There are other lessons we can learn from today’s scripture. When Jesus sent the disciples out to carry on his ministry, they went without possessions. “Traveling light” helped them remain single-minded, focused on their mission. How often we, and our churches, get distracted by all of the details of maintaining an institution and providing programs, forgetting what we are really about. The other lesson is this—the disciples shared in Jesus’ authority and mission. Their ministries were not their own. They were extensions of the ministry of Jesus. Remembering this is just as needful now as it was in the 1st century. Probably more so. The mission of the church is to continue Jesus’ work, not to get caught up in our own priorities and preferences. It is about simplicity. It is about focus on what is truly important. It is about being authentic and willing to talk about our faith. And willing to listen to the stories of others. It is about having the courage to risk being rejected and being able to pick ourselves up and move on to others who do want to hear. For they are out there, people who are yearning to make meaning out of the confusion and chaos of life, people who are looking for, as our senator tells us, “a deeper, fuller conversation about faith.” And we have that gift to offer. Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.