

June 6, 2021
The Second Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 10, Year B
Mark 3:20-35
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Sitting at the Feet of Jesus

It might have taken you by surprise, if you even saw the news in this week's email that I will be taking a mini-sabbatical beginning in about a week.

As you probably know, it is part of my call and contract with Emmanuel that I am eligible for a three-month sabbatical every four years that I serve here as pastor. This means that I was eligible for my first sabbatical beginning on December 1, 2018, which was the four-year anniversary of my time here at Emmanuel. Obviously, I wasn't going to jump up and go on December 1st, just say, "Bye everybody, have a nice Christmas and Epiphany, see you for Lent!"

Originally, I was going to take my sabbatical during the summer of 2019, but for a few reasons, some related to things going on here at Emmanuel and some related to things going on in my own life, that sabbatical was pushed back to the summer of 2020. Rich Lassen actually joked at the 2020 congregational meeting that I was going to be eligible for my second sabbatical, in 2022, before I even took my first one.

At the time it sounded like a funny joke. As I shared my plans for my 2020 sabbatical and I also assured everyone who was at that meeting that I wasn't planning to take another sabbatical in 2022.

Well, ha, ha, ha. Like everyone else, I had no idea, even as late as the end of January 2020, what the rest of 2020 would bring us. With my family, I was planning on taking an eight-week road trip around the United States, seeing many of the national parks, reveling in the beauty and majesty of God's creation, as part of a study of Ecological Theology which is a theological discipline that explores interconnectedness of humanity

and the environment and how obedience and service to God is expressed in a dominion over the natural world that reflects that self-sacrificing lordship of Jesus.

You know what happened. 2020 happened. Covid-19 happened. Lockdowns and travel bans happened. By Easter of 2020 I knew that I definitely wasn't going to be going on sabbatical that summer. So, we cancelled our plans and with the rest of you waited and watched and prayed as 2020 unfolded, with all of its heartbreak and horror and also with its moments of transcendent beauty.

2021 rolled around and still, the pandemic held us in its grip. Back in January, we didn't know that by now, by June, state guidelines and restrictions would be lifted, that travel bans would be over, that many of us would be vaccinated, that some would start to feel comfortable not wearing their mask in every time and in every situation.

What I did know back in January, was that this summer, the summer of 2021 still did not feel like the right time for us to hit the open road. There was too much up in the air, too many unknowns. I love to plan, but in January 2021 it was almost impossible to imagine what life would look like a month down the road, let alone six months. Still, 2018 was three years ago, and 2022 was fast approaching. I was about to be eligible for my second sabbatical and I hadn't taken my first. So, in conversation with the Executive Committee and the Mutual Ministry Team, I decided to take a shortened "first sabbatical", one month down from three months, that wouldn't take me out of the state or far from home, but that would give me a time to breathe, to catch up with myself, to break out of crisis mode; a time to get ready for what comes next. I announced that mini-sabbatical at the January 2021 congregational meeting.

Ironically enough, even though I couldn't imagine doing it in January of 2020, I also announced at that meeting that I will be going on sabbatical in 2022. That will be the long one, the three month one, the traveling one, sort of the second one.

Did you hear me mention that I like to plan? Well, I do, and when it was originally announced it, this sabbatical was planned for July of this year. I was going to be gone for

the month of July. But then, as the Executive Committee and I were talking, it seemed that it would be better if I took my sabbatical earlier than that. So, I backed it up to June, figuring that I could take the month of June off. But then, because of Synod Assembly and Graduation Sunday and some other things going on here at Emmanuel, it seemed like it would be better for me to push my sabbatical up to mid-June to mid-July.

And now it's here. There's no more time to rethink and reschedule and struggle with how hard it is to fit sabbath rest into my life. It's just time to announce it and then do it. If it seems like it snuck up on you, please rest assured that it feels the same way to me.

Today's gospel reading is a challenging one. Jesus is accused of things that it's hard to understand and Jesus' accusers and restrainers aren't necessarily the people that we wouldn't expect them to be. By the religious leaders, Jesus is accused of being possessed by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons. Perhaps that's not so shocking. It's a major thread of the story, in all four gospels, that Jesus met with opposition from most of the religious leaders that he encountered, especially those from Jerusalem. So perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that these religious leaders, who came from out of town, from Jerusalem to Nazareth, to find out what was going on with this new preacher and teacher who was causing a stir, healing the sick, casting out demons, eating with all the wrong people, and saying shocking things about who God is, about who God loves, destroying the social order, which threatened, not only their power, but also the shaky peace with Rome that they considered it their duty to uphold and protect. So, they immediately passed judgment and that judgment was a harsh one. They said that Jesus was not from God, but from the father of demons. Like I said, not so surprising. This conflict with religious leaders followed Jesus throughout his ministry and took him straight to the cross. After all, they were the ones who were supposed to be in charge and he was challenging their authority.

But the other people who opposed his ministry perhaps do come as more of a surprise. It was his own family, his mother and his brothers.

Jesus had gone home, home to Nazareth, with his disciples, and others who followed him, and by the time he got there, he had a reputation. It sounds like he was trying to have a nice dinner with his new friends, the disciples, and his family, but, apparently, he had enough of a reputation that, when word got around that Jesus was home, back in Nazareth, a crowd gathered around his house and instead of eating with his family, he went and ministered to the crowd. Did he talk to them; teach them about God? Did he heal their sick? Did he cast out demons? It's not clear what he was doing, but whatever it was, it upset his family. It upset them enough to try to stop him. They left their house and, the text says that they, "went out to restrain him." Perhaps they were worried because some of his neighbors are recorded as saying, "He is out of his mind."

But what was Jesus doing that was so bad that his family felt that they needed to hold him back, to get him back into the house, where no one could see him, where no one could hear him, where he couldn't embarrass the family?

Whatever he was doing there was no stopping him. He threw off his family's restraining hands, he talked back to the religious leaders, and then he claimed a whole new group of people as his community, as his family. At the end of our gospel reading for today, Jesus's mother and brothers tried again, to get to him, to bring him back into their fold, to talk to him, perhaps to talk him out of what he was doing. But when word came to Jesus that his family was trying to reach him, Jesus just looked at those who had gathered around him and said, "Who are my mother and my brothers?...Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

It's a surprising response from Jesus who has been lifted up as a champion of the family in some Christian circles.

But for my purposes, what I want to do is look more closely at those who Jesus claimed as his family, those he called brother and sister and mother, those he said were his people, while his biological family was standing outside, barred from Jesus, not, I suspect, by any lack of love that Jesus had for them, but by their desire to silence and control him.

So, what did those who were claimed as Jesus' true family do to earn his esteem? What were they doing when Jesus celebrated their obedience? What was the will of God that they were carrying out? Wouldn't it behoove us to know, those of us, who have been called children of God and who want to make sure that we don't lose our place in Jesus' family.

Well, I would say that the answer to what they were doing was wishful thinking on my part, if I hadn't read it somewhere else, from a scholar who spends a lot of time studying the scriptures, studying and preaching on Mark. What were those devoted followers of Jesus doing, those who were claimed as Jesus' family? How were they doing the will of God? It's a reasonable thing to think, I want to copy them. I want to be like them. I want to do what they were doing. The scholar points out what should be obvious to anyone who has read the text or heard it read. It's right in front of us, but it might be tempting to think that that couldn't be it. It couldn't be all there is to it. But what the newly formed family members of Jesus were doing in this text was....sitting. The text says, "A crowd was sitting around him..." And then it says, "And looking at those who sat around him, Jesus said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers.'"

They were simply with Jesus. Listening to him teach. Watching him work. They weren't setting his agenda for him. They weren't trying to tell him what he should be doing and how he should be doing it. They weren't trying to restrain him. They weren't questioning his motives. They weren't saying that he was out of his mind. They weren't saying that he was possessed by the lord of demons. They were just sitting, listening, learning, trusting.

Do you feel it? The busyness of life before starting to rev back up? For many of us, our work lives didn't miss a beat, for which we could be nothing but grateful as it meant that we still had a job, but, some of us lost a job and had plenty of time on our hands, but it was time tainted by worries for what would come next. But for all of us, all of the other pieces of life went on hiatus during the pandemic. We couldn't meet with friends after work, unless we wanted more screen time. Kids after school activities were mostly cancelled. Going shopping was no longer a form of entertainment as masks had to be worn, many stores were closed, and it just didn't feel safe. We couldn't travel much outside of our yards and our neighborhoods. There was less to do.

It wasn't fun as we missed holidays and birthdays and gatherings with family and friends, and travels and fun, but it was a slower pace, one for which some of us have yearned. But that's all over now. Everything is coming back and bringing with it the extra pressure of making up for lost time, for all of the things that we missed. It's going to get a lot harder to make time to do, what Jesus says is the will of the Father; a lot harder to sit at the feet of Jesus.

So, I'm going to take a little bit of time, time that I'm sure will fly by, to do just that. I'm going to take some sabbath time, to sit at the feet of Jesus. To learn so that I can teach. To listen so that I can discern. To refresh so that I can speak a word of hope. To remember that I am God's beloved child, that Jesus has called me sister, so that I can welcome others into God's family, so that I can love as Jesus loved, so that I can follow wherever Jesus' leads, without being restrained by lack of energy, by fear, by lack of imagination.

I'll be with you next Sunday for worship, when we'll have a lot of celebrating to do, as we welcome new members, and celebrate the graduates in our congregation, and bless the quilts. I'll also ask you next week, to pray for me and bless me as I head off for my sabbatical.

On June 14th, my sabbatical begins. I'll be absent from weekly worship and I'll be away from the office for a month, but rest assured, I will still be with you in prayer, and in the gathering that Jesus has called his family. I will still be with you in spirit, sitting at the feet of Jesus. Amen.