

Mark 6:6b-13

Then he went out among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

How the Good News Spreads | Dan McCoig | 24 Jan 2010

1.

Have you ever tried to summarize any of the gospels in as few words as possible?

Getting things in writing, down to their essence, is a useful exercise.

It is one way we know whether we really have a handle on things or not.

Here's my attempt at the gospel according to Mark in 25 words or less.

Jesus and the disciples worked hard in tough terrain, casting out demons, curing the sick, and preaching good news, while encountering some rude rejections.

If you were counting, I was just under 25 words – 24 to be exact.

2.

A number of years ago the Evangelical Environmental Network posed the question as to what vehicle Christians should drive.

The EEN's mission includes "building the Lord's kingdom by active service to restore and renew the works of God's hands."

More on this in a moment.

Several years ago cartoonist Doug Marlette, creator of the cartoon strip Kudzu and political cartoonist, published an editorial page cartoon that depicted a man in Middle Eastern attire driving a sizeable SUV.

In the back of the truck was an outsized nuclear weapon.

The cartoon was published with the tongue-in-cheek caption "What would Mohammed drive?" with a wink and a nod to the EEN's question of "What would Jesus drive?"

To say the least, the cartoon resulted in a firestorm of controversy.

Marlette, who, by the way, died in 2007, received nearly 5,000 emails.

All of them said basically the same thing.

How could he!

They called his cartoon blasphemous, ignorant, bigoted, disrespectful, hateful.

The readers of the newspapers in which the cartoon appeared demanded an apology.

Some demanded more -- like Marlette's resignation and/or death.

Marlette did not apologize.

But, he did explain.

He said he was not criticizing Islam in the least.

Rather, through the cartoon, he was suggesting that extremists had hijacked Islam.

Additionally, the cartoon alluded to the question posed by the EEN.

Namely, what would Jesus drive?

Or, what would Jesus' followers drive?

The EEN argues that our choice of transportation is a deeply moral and ethical decision.

They argue that "of all the choices we make as consumers the vehicles we drive have the biggest impact on all of God's creation."

According to the EEN, choosing a car is an important moral choice for the Christian.

3.

If you thought that this is the point in the sermon where I would declare some vehicle choices moral and ethical and other vehicle choices immoral and unethical, well, I am about to disappoint you.

I am not going to do that for a lot of reasons, chief among them is the fact that our Bible text doesn't go in that direction at all.

And, homiletically, everything to this point in the sermon has been designed to attract and hopefully sustain your interest.

Granted, Jesus and his followers could have benefited from an SUV.

The terrain they traveled was rugged.

Anyone who has visited the Middle East can attest to this.

So, if Jesus were to drive anything rather than walk, it would have to be something pretty tough.

But, of course, he and his followers walked from place to place and did so as lightly as possible.

3.

Our lesson today is Mark's account of Jesus calling of the disciples and sending them out on their mission in pairs.

The disciples' task will be challenging, which is putting it mildly.

They will encounter what Jesus describes as "unclean spirits."

But, they will have authority over these spirits.

The way will be tough.

They can expect to have doors slammed in their faces.

After all, that is more than a reasonable expectation when you are calling on persons to change their lives, which is what the word repent means; the way we are going is wrong – we have to turn around and go in a new direction, the right direction.

But there will be successes as well.

Illnesses will be cured because of the disciples' work in Jesus' name.

4.

Let's set aside the "what would Jesus drive" question.

And in it's place, let's ask whether those who bear Jesus' name, Christians, are willing to go where perhaps, metaphorically, only the most rugged of SUVs could travel.

For me, that is an interesting question.

Let's think about it.

Most of the SUVs I see on the road seldom utilize their most fundamental features, namely engines and drive systems capable of making easy work of even the most menacing terrain.

They are used instead to commute to and from work over paved surfaces, to go to and from the grocery store.

Occasionally, the SUV will get taken to places for which it was designed, but not often.

Allow me to draw an analogy.

I believe a similar distortion occurs in the practice of our Christian faith.

Most Christians that I know possess a remarkably wide range of skill and knowledge and experience that could be put to all kinds of uses in advancing God's kingdom on earth.

Tragically, the church hasn't called on persons to employ their skill and knowledge and experience in service to God or if we have we have done so poorly.

Tragically as well, we may not fully appreciate that God calls all of who we are to not only provide for ourselves and our families but to build the kingdom as well.

At this point, I am going to be a little hard on us, including myself.

Many of us work one job.

Meaning, we have time in the evenings and on the weekends.

How much of the time could be used for kingdom building pursuits?

Comparatively and relatively, we are wealthy.

We should use our wealth to provide for our loved ones – food, shelter, health care, transportation, education, meaningful pursuits.

Many times, these things do not take all of our earnings.

What becomes of the surplus?

We, of course, need to save and invest for that proverbial rainy day and when the day comes we no longer work.

Truth be told, we have an abundance from which to share, even in a down economy.

Just like an SUV is not bad in and of itself, material wealth is not bad in and of itself.

The middle and upper middle classes of this nation have made and continue to make incredible things happen with our time and wealth.

But we can distort and misuse the time and wealth God has given to us and as a result all of the things God wants to see happen go wanting.

5.

Recently, in a journal article I ran across the term “SUV spirituality.”

The term works in this sermon.

If I understand the author correctly, SUV spirituality means serving Jesus by doing something tough, and by performing the Lord’s work in some tough places.

SUV spirituality may involve hosting the Winchester Area Temporary Thermal Shelter or volunteering in the shelter, teaching an ESL course for recent immigrants, giving up a week of vacation to accompany a youth group on a mission trip, serving as a foster parent to a troubled child from the community, or tutoring a struggling student that perhaps others have given up on.

We are limited only by our imaginations because God’s imagination is boundless.

SUV spirituality can also mean standing up for what we believe as disciples of Jesus Christ.

It has never been easy to leave the comfortable road of conventional wisdom and to face the rocks and logs and other barriers that society throws in our way.

Jesus offended his neighbors when he spoke with wisdom and performed deeds of power.

Jesus’ first disciples had to be prepared to be rejected by the people they visited as well (vv. 3, 11).

But through it all, they were tough, and they stuck to their mission of spreading the gospel through word and deed.

6.

So, I guess I should mention the sermon title before I close.

How, then, does the good news spread?

It spreads through you and me.

It spreads through what we say and what we do.

It spreads through how we say what we say and how we do what we do.

For me, Jesus was and is about peace and love and forgiveness.

This means that Christian discipleship is about the very same things.

The community that values these things and embodies these things and says these things and does these things will spread the good news.

First Presbyterian Church is just such a community and strives to be an even better peaceful, loving, and forgiving community.

Amen.