

“Cultivating Grace”
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson
Mark 6:1-13 with Ezekiel 2:1-5
July 7, 2024 — Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

In her newest novel, *The Women*, Kristin Hannah tells the story of Frankie McGrath, a young woman who volunteers for the Army Nurse Corps and ships out to Vietnam in the spring of '67.¹ Frankie grew up on San Diego's Coronado Island, in a family and community that proudly supported the military. Her father even displayed a “Hero's Wall” in his office, which boasted war medals and photos of family members in uniform. Ever since she was young, Frankie had heard her father tell their stories; she'd learned that one had to *earn* a place on that wall. And Frankie intended to do just that.

But, after two years tending to wounded soldiers and civilians in Vietnam, Frankie returns home to an unfamiliar landscape. She is greeted *not* with ticker-tape parades, but with protests. “Go back to Vietnam!” someone yells when Frankie arrives at baggage claim in Los Angeles. Outside the airport, she tries to hail a cab. But, as soon as the taxi drivers notice her Army uniform, they speed away. When she finally makes it home to Coronado, her father scoffs at the photograph she's brought to hang on the Hero's Wall. Even her “military-proud” parents refuse to acknowledge — must less honor — their daughter's service and sacrifice.

While I've seen this era written about in books and represented in movies, I'd never paused to ponder what it would have been like to return home from Vietnam. Of course, many of you remember the demonstrations against that war; some of you may have experienced them firsthand. But, as someone a generation removed from the turmoil of those years, Kristin Hannah's novel brought this era to life; her portrayal of Frankie's homecoming caused my heart to break for all those service members who faced hostility (rather than welcome) upon their return.

While the Gospel describes a very different historical moment, a very different mission, that scene at the Los Angeles airport is the image that came to mind when I pictured the cold reception Jesus experienced in Nazareth. For the second time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus returns to his hometown only to find that his fellow Nazarenes are less than enthusiastic about his ministry.

When Jesus first begins teaching in the synagogue, the audience is “astounded.” *Where did this man get all this?* they wonder. *Isn't this the carpenter ... Mary's son?* But it doesn't take long for astonishment to turn to antagonism. The crowd takes offense at Jesus, Mark tells us. But he does not tell us why. It's possible they take umbrage with something Jesus says there

¹ Kristin Hannah, *The Women* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2024).

in the synagogue, though we'd have no way of knowing as Mark does not record his sermon. Perhaps some in the audience are jealous that such wisdom and power have been bestowed upon Jesus, of all people. A lowly day-laborer rather than a learned leader! Maybe some in the crowd simply disapprove of Jesus' mission.

Given the hints Mark drops in the text, I would guess the issue is that Jesus has defied expectation and shirked his duties. *Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?* The Gospel writer is careful to list multiple members of Jesus' family, which makes the absence of his father Joseph all the more conspicuous. And, if his father has died or abandoned his family, the customs of the day would dictate that the firstborn son should assume the role of Head of the Household — the one responsible for taking care of the family. Perhaps the hometown crowd takes offense because, in their view, Jesus has shirked his familial responsibilities on the home front. This carpenter shouldn't be gallivanting around the Galilean countryside! He should be home making tables in order to put bread on the table for his mother and brothers and sisters!

No matter the reason behind the crowd's reaction, the people of Nazareth reject Jesus. And — in doing so — they, too, shirk a responsibility dictated by the customs of the day. In a culture that commands hospitality and welcome, they fail to provide either to Jesus and his disciples. It may not have been a march or a sit-in, but it is certainly *not* the reception one would expect for a hometown kid.

It is easy to imagine many different responses to this kind of rejection. Jesus could have rebuked his fellow Nazarenes, as he occasionally rebukes others for a lack of faith. If this story had taken place in the age of social media, Jesus could have tweeted his displeasure or left a Yelp review that ripped Nazareth to shreds. Given the vitriol of our age, we would almost expect some reaction that would have escalated conflict or deepened division.

But, of course, that's not what Jesus does. He does not rebuke, demean, or vilify. He does not call down fire and brimstone upon Nazareth. Instead, he responds with grace. Jesus excuses the people's reaction, saying: *Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown.* Jesus shakes his head at their unbelief and, then, he shakes the dust from his feet. He moves on to other villages to continue his mission of teaching and healing and proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come near.

As soon as Jesus leaves Nazareth, he calls the Twelve and begins sending them out, two-by-two. Now, the Gospel of Mark is known for its quick pace; there is rarely a break in the action. But I find it interesting that Jesus chooses *this moment* to draw others into his holy work. Having just experienced rejection in his hometown, Jesus sets up his disciples to experience the same. He even tells them what to do when a community refuses to welcome them: *As you*

leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet, he says. But, still, he sends them forth to cast out demons and cure the sick, to participate in his mission of bringing healing and hope.

Some scholars are quick to separate the first part of today's passage from the second.² They say that the church's schedule of readings erroneously combines two self-contained units of text. This may be so. But, still, I assume Mark was intentional in placing these scenes back-to-back in his narrative. And I find their pairing in today's text illuminating. Because it reminds us that the way Jesus moves about the world informs the way his followers move about the world.

Take nothing with you, Jesus instructs his disciples. *No bread, no bag, no money, no change of clothes. Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place*, he says.

Jesus sends out the Twelve with only a walking stick. They carry nothing that could sustain or shelter them on their journeys. Instead, they must rely solely on the hospitality of strangers. This is *not* like the call of Ezekiel, when God sends the prophet out to a nation of rebels to proclaim a word of "lamentation and mourning and woe" (Ezek 2:10). The Twelve are not to go forth with a word of judgment, but with openness and trust. They must trust that goodness and grace await them in the villages of Galilee, that they will find open homes, open hands, open hearts.

This will not always be the case, as Jesus' followers witnessed in Nazareth. Some people will reject the good news, and the disciples with it. When a town refuses hospitality and welcome, they are to move on, just as Jesus did. He instructs the Twelve: *Shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them*. It's a prophetic demonstration to show that those who proclaim the kingdom of God will accept nothing from those who reject the kingdom of God.³ The disciples shouldn't even take the dirt from these villages along on the next step of their journey. It's a way of leaving every aspect of that experience behind — the apathy, the disbelief, the ill-will or malice. They are not to let this infect their own hearts and distract from their mission. They are simply to move on to another town in hopes that the next door they knock upon will open to reveal someone who receives them and the good news that they bring.

And it seems the Twelve do find many open homes, many open hands, many open hearts. It seems villages across Galilee welcome these pairs of disciples and sustain them on their journeys. And, in turn, these villagers find themselves sustained by grace. As the hosts offer bread that nourishes the body, the disciples offer a word of hope that nourishes the soul. It is a mission of mutuality, of shared ministry. And it transforms countless lives. Mark tells us that the Twelve *cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them*.

² See, for instance: Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman, "Commentary on Mark 6:1-13," workingpreacher.org.

³ C. Clifton Black, "Commentary on Mark 6:1-13," workingpreacher.org.

I imagine that this work was transformative for the disciples as well. Not only because Jesus empowered them with uncommon authority. Not only because they participated in healing after healing after healing. But because this mission was about cultivating grace. To enter a town with nothing and to rely solely on the hospitality of strangers is an exercise in receiving grace. To shake off the dust and to let go of the rejection of strangers is an exercise in offering grace. To go forth as Christ commands is an exercise in trusting God's grace. None of this is easy, of course. It requires a well of confidence and abiding hope and sure knowledge that the mission is not theirs alone. After all, Jesus has equipped and sent these disciples, two-by-two. And — lest they or we forget — the one who commands grace in every circumstance is the very one who first models grace.

Such work could be transformative for us, too. Especially in an age when grace seems a rare response. In an age when we can't imagine relying on the hospitality of strangers because doors are locked out of suspicion or fear. In an age when we've come to expect complaints or criticism or condemnation wherever conflict arises. In an age when it's hard to trust that goodness will find us if we step into the unknown. Yes, the kind of work that draws us into relationships of mutuality could be transformative for us, too.

In her book, *The Sum of Us*, Heather McGhee tells the story of a woman who stumbled into such relationships.⁴ While conducting her research into the economic impact of social policies, McGhee visited the dying mill town of Lewiston, Maine. Like many towns across our nation, it had emptied out after major employers shipped jobs over seas. Now, vacant homes and storefronts are being filled by newcomers — mostly by refugees from Africa.

The influx of immigrants has transformed the life of one of Lewiston's long-time residents. Cecile Thornton is the descendant of French Canadians who came to Maine a century ago to work the cotton mills. She grew up speaking French around the dinner table, but — in an effort to assimilate — lost her native tongue. A few years ago, Cecile retired to an empty home in Lewiston. Her entire family had either died or moved away, and she felt isolated and alone. In desperate need of community, Cecile decided to reclaim her heritage. So she went to the Franco Center downtown and found a room full of elderly white Mainers like herself, all speaking ... English. "You need to go to the French Club at Hillview," someone told her. "That's the place to learn French."

When Cecile arrived at the French Club, she was shocked to see she was the only white person in the room. A man who'd recently arrived from Congo came to greet her. And, after a timid, 'Bonjour,' Cecile launched into the longest French conversation she'd had since

⁴ The following illustration includes both paraphrase and direct quotes from: Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021).

childhood. By the end of the first session, she was exhausted and thrilled. “I felt like I belonged with them!” she remembers.⁵

Soon, that community of French-speaking immigrants became the center of Cecile’s life. When she realized it was hard for her friends to attend French Club once they enrolled in community college or got a job downtown, she encouraged them to come to the Franco Center instead. Soon the two groups were mixing; elderly white Mainers with halting vocabularies were learning French from new Black Mainers who spoke fluently. “Today, Cecile volunteers to help asylum seekers, doing winter coat drives and connecting new arrivals to services, but she’d be the first to say that what she gives pales in comparison to what she has received,” McGhee writes.⁶

It is a story of mutuality, of hands extended and blessings shared. Cecile Thornton stepped out in faith, trusting that goodness and grace awaited her. And she found a community of hospitality and welcome, even if it wasn’t the community she initially expected would receive her. Soon she found opportunities to bring others together in relationships of mutual care and support and to use her gifts to help heal divisions in the Lewiston community. It is a story of grace offered and grace received and lives transformed.

One on one, two-by-two, such work could be transformative for us, as well. And, by sharing the grace of Jesus Christ, we begin — little by little, step by step — to transform the age we live in. We’ll have our own stories to tell of doors opened and hospitality offered, of lives changed and grace practiced with an abandon that comes from trusting the Lord who goes before us. The one who sustains us in the mission to which we have been called. The one who is the giver of grace.

⁵ *ibid*, 262.

⁶ *ibid*, 262-263.