

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, February 4, 2024

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So this morning we will continue in our worship series entitled The Power of the Kingdom, and we'll also continue in our study of the Gospel of Mark. We're in the sixth chapter this morning, beginning in the second half of the sixth verse. Before we read from scripture, let us go to God In prayer.

Gracious and loving God, as rain falls outside to nourish your creation, may your Spirit fall fresh upon us to nourish our souls. May it quiet us that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might respond. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This is the Gospel of Mark, 6th chapter, beginning in the sixth verse.

Then Jesus traveled through the surrounding villages teaching. He called for the Twelve and sent them out in pairs. He gave them authority over unclean spirits. He instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a walking stick—no bread, no bags, and no money in their belts. He told them to wear sandals but not to put on two shirts. He said, “Whatever house you enter, remain there until you leave that place. If a place doesn’t welcome you or listen to you, as you leave, shake the dust off your feet as a witness against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that people should change their hearts and lives. They cast out many demons, and they anointed many sick people with olive oil and healed them.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So this isn't how a planner likes to plan a trip, okay. I'm heading on a...just a two-day jaunt tomorrow, and I've already laid out the pants and the shirts that I will wear. I got a couple of different pairs of shoes and some other supplies that I'm going to need. If you're anything like me, and you have a long journey ahead, you do some planning. Maybe there's a note in your iPhone devoted to your packing list, right? and you are prepared in one way or another. We don't want to be in the midst of the journey and not have everything that we need. And then Jesus says to the disciples here, “You're not taking anything. I'm sending you out in pairs but you're not supposed to take bags with you, and I know that you think you need some extra cash. Do not put that in your belt. You know it might get cold in the evening. Don't put on a second layer. You're not going to need that either, not on this journey. And, by the way, that snack that you were...you had packed for you or you packed for yourself, you don't get to take that. Not on this journey.” The disciples are going out—interesting for us to note that the 12 are called here. Some of the disciples are called earlier in this gospel account in the Gospel of Mark, but here all 12 are gathered together; and they are told to go and to proclaim good news to heal and to anoint the sick. Supposed to go out to do this with nothing, and I think that's important for us. When I'm packing for a journey, I'm trying to think of every possible thing that could go wrong, or even right, and make sure I'm prepared for it. On this journey, though, going out empty-handed has

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implications for them. First of all, as people who are pretty self-reliant and who think that they can produce things of their own valtion, it puts them in a particular posture of need as they go out into the world. They have nothing to barter with; they have nothing to trade with someone that they'll come in contact with, nothing to pay for that roof over their head in the towns where they will find themselves. If they're anything like us, people who are committed to engineering our own solutions because we think we're smart enough or wealthy enough or even clever enough, and they are corrected in their thinking from the very beginning. They will go out into the world vulnerable to the people that they will meet and the elements of nature. They will go out vulnerable to hunger and cold. They will go out vulnerable to the world that God has created. And it seems to me that at least one of the reasons why Jesus would instruct them in this way to not take anything with them is to ensure that they know and that the people that they interact with know that everything they accomplish in those villages will be accomplished by God and by God alone. It will not be their own Ingenuity that creates healing. It will be the spirit of God working through them. God's provision will be perceived most clearly in their poverty.

It's an important lesson for the disciples, but also a lesson for us. Whatever it is that we accomplish in the world is not of our own Ingenuity but by the grace of God at work in the world. It's important that the disciples know that from the very beginning. But they won't be completely without; they'll be with someone. Jesus does this. He sends them out in pairs, and this becomes particularly important for us. Not only does it connect us with some of our Hebrew stories from of old, this idea of God pairing things together over time, but it is letting them know that while they think they will be without many things, mostly material things, they will not be without the presence of another with them. Part of the power of the kingdom is that it reminds us that we need one another on the journey, particularly in a growing age when individualism is championed more and more and more. This passage recenters us to the idea that we are actually in need of one another. I often joke with couples that are about to get married that I hope that they've traveled together, because it reveals—traveling together reveals—all sorts of little things that you don't learn in any other way. You might learn them about a soon to be spouse or a friend or a partner in business. When you travel together it reveals something. When you travel together, your partner in travel gets to see you when you're cranky, gets to see you when you're experiencing quiet joy. It gets to see you when you're tired. And you get to do that for and with another as well. Traveling together, laboring in this case together, builds relationships in ways that really nothing else can, I don't think.

I was captivated about this time last year when a story came out of Meredith College in the Triangle region of North Carolina. it's a women's college there, maybe some of you all are familiar with it, a liberal arts school of about 1,400 women. It's a D3 school when it comes to NCAA and sports. I remember a story from a year ago that got republished here just in the last few days actually. Coach Jimmy Marshall sent out a schoolwide email in February of 2023, letting the entire school know that they were in need, the girls golf team was in need of two golfers to complete the roster. According to the NCAA division 3 rules, you have to have four golfers to have a golf team. And through all sorts of different things happening to them, the

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Meredith college team was down to only two golfers. The email to the student body said if you're interested, meet on the quad tomorrow morning. The next morning exactly two young women showed up. Macy K Aycok and Sarah Marshall. Neither of them, interestingly, had ever swung a golf club in their lives. They would later admit that they were most intrigued by the inclusion of the idea in the coach's email that anyone who volunteered for the team would get outfitted in all the best gear. They would be able to say once and forever that they were a college athlete. That was appealing to Macy and to Sarah, and so the coach asked them what their handicaps were, and they asked what a handicap was. And then they loaded up the van to drive 3 hours to the golf tournament on the coast of North Carolina. Macy and Sarah were beside each other. They had never met. Only 1400 students, but they had never really crossed paths. They didn't know each other. So they spent the next three hours getting to know each other on this brand new adventure that they were on together. There were two other women who had been on the team and really took what was going on seriously, quite understandably, but for Macy and for Sarah it was something brand new. They spent three hours getting to know each other. Macy would talk about how she had grown up in a pretty privileged family until high school when her mother got a really difficult diagnosis and her father kind of checked out, and she had to spend most of her high school years really parenting her mother through treatments and through recovery. That cost her a whole lot. It was part of why she had ended up at Meredith. Sarah would talk about how she had found Meredith to be a really welcoming place when she first visited. She knew she wanted to be a part of it, but she had had her own struggles too. They spent three hours in that van together, and what they described was this friendship, this bond that was created. If you...if you've ever spent time in a church van heading to a partnership trip or maybe Montreat or something else, if you've ever spent time on...in a school bus with people for an extended period time, you know that there is a particular type of bonding that can only happen on like an uncomfortable rubber seat, right, a particular type of conversation that seems to grow from no radio, no distractions. And so Sarah and Macy had that time together, and then they got to the tournament; and it was beginning to rain, and they had hoped, they had kind of dreamed together as they were making that drive, they had said, "I think we should be together. What if we played together? We could support each other and encourage each other, right?" And when they got there, the...the organizer of the golf tournament separated them. Macy went off the front nine. Sarah off the back nine. Maybe we have some golfers in here. If you are a very good golfer, then it takes you usually 72 swings to complete 18 holes, okay? That's swings of the driver and irons and putter as well, right, 72. If you're not such a good golfer, like myself, it takes somewhere around 90 swings in a given 4 hour period, all right? If you're a beginner it might take you 110, 125 swings to get through 18 holes. Between Macy and Sarah they took 434 swings, but they finished. The next day the tournament organizer said, "We're going to put y'all together. We're going to let you go off a half hour early." They showed perseverance together, encouraging each other. When one would miss the ball, and the other would shoot it into the woods, they'd go help each other find it and bring it back.

That story reminded me of what I think Jesus is trying to instill in the disciples this morning, that the journey is always more fruitful, more meaningful when we have partners on

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it. In fact, there...there are certain journeys that we simply cannot take alone. Maybe for you, you might imagine your partner as your spouse, a partner in life that you committed to a long time ago or even recently. For others it might be a friend, might be a colleague at work journeying together through something of your vocation. But what we know is, to get through this beautiful and difficult life, we need people to walk with us. Jesus doesn't send them out individually. He sends them out in pairs, gives them every bit of power to do the work that they need to do. And they're supposed to go into all these villages, they're supposed to meet new people, sleep in houses that are unfamiliar to them and be about the grace and healing that they have been equipped to do. That's all beautiful, fine, well and good. but Jesus knows that there's something else that's going to happen on that Journey. Jesus knows that there will be some places where they get to see amazing things happen, things they could have scarcely imagined God could author in their lives, in the lives of the villagers that they get to meet, beautiful things they couldn't have dreamed of. But there will be other times, other times when they try as best they can, and they don't seem to make a dent. They try as hard as they possibly can to be compelling, to be persuasive, but the villagers aren't hearing it. Maybe you've been there, maybe you've been in that place where you've been working really hard to accomplish something—in maybe a relationship, or in work, or even in church life; and at some point in that journey of trying to accomplish it, you've decided that it is your job to accomplish this thing and that it is going to be accomplished only by your own will and determination and perseverance. If you've done that, good on you, but Jesus here says there is a time when you are to recognize, perhaps through the voice of a friend, that the work is no longer yours to do. So he says, “If anyone doesn't receive the message that you are bringing, here's what I want you to do. Walk to the edge of town, take your sandals off, knock them together, let the dust fall to the ground, and then move on.” Scripture says that this ritual that Jesus gives them is to be a testament against that village. If you want to read it that way, you can. Many have. Cursed is that place that wouldn't receive the message. But I think there's something else going on in the midst of our tendency to power through in a friendship or something going on at work or even in parenting or perhaps in class for our students here this morning. Jesus says that there is something, there is a time in which it is appropriate, yay faithful, to take off your sandals and to knock them together and let the dust fall to the ground. Jesus gives them a ritual against discouragement in their faithfulness. Sometimes it's important for the disciples. Sometimes it's important for us to dust off those sandals and not to see that ritual as a ritual that somehow marks defeat. No, it is simply a ritual to remind us that there is a certain type of work that needs doing that is God's to do now and not yours. We think that dusting off our sandals is a mark of defeat, but it's actually an act of faith. It's an act of faith that claims that God can be at work in our absence, that we don't have to will everything into existence. Indeed we never truly do. It's always God's provision. And sometimes we can leave a place and dust our sandals off and know that God is still there. I wonder if it's less about damning the village and more about marking the time for the disciples. I don't know about you, but I sometimes will finally receive the message that there is something that I am not going to be able to accomplish, and I need to move on and trust that God's going to do it. And I sometimes do that really faithfully, but then a couple of months go by, and it comes back up in that friendship or even at church, just kind of bubbles back up; and because I haven't ritualized it, I forget. And I wonder if that action of knocking the dust off is not only for the

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village, but more so even for the disciples when they come back, or even to you when you come back to that place that you know is no longer the place for you to labor, to be reminded 'I've been here before. This is frustrating because I've done this same exact thing. What did I do last time? I dusted off my sandals. I trusted that God was at work even in my absence, okay? All right.'

There's a certain amount of work that we are called to, and then there's also a certain amount of faith that we are called to practice, in trusting that God's working even when we feel like the people haven't been receptive to the message. It's a reminder for us every time we revisit it. God's still there even when we're not. What I love about this story is that when Jesus sends the pairs out to do the good and faithful work of God, to heal and to transform and to free, he sends them out empty-handed so that every time they see something beautiful and good happen, they know it's God. Every time they're welcomed in hospitality, they know it's God. Every time their belly is filled, they know it's God. Every time someone else covers the tab, they know it's God. He sends them out empty-handed so that God might be glorified. He doesn't send them out alone, not fully empty, sends them out with someone to journey with them, because he wants them to know that the kingdom is not about you alone but about us. And then he tells them, "I want you to work absolutely as hard as you can; and when you've done that, I want you to trust that I can carry it from here." I think that's a really...really...those are really important lessons for us as we imagine together the power of the kingdom of God to provide, to partner, and to persist. Even in our absence.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.