

5 July 2015 (6th Sunday After Pentecost/14th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“The Honor of God’s Presence”
Mark 6:1-13

I believe I was a teenager when I received my first formal invitation—it may have been to a wedding, I don’t recall what the event was. But what I do remember is the formal language: “We request the honor of your presence.” The honor of *my* presence? Why would anyone be honored by my presence? I was still too young to be jaded or unimpressed with such niceties, the tissue covering the text of the invitation, the engraved print on heavy cream stock, the favor of a reply requested. I am sure I sat up a little taller as I read it. Since then I have received more such formal invitations than I can count. Some have been to weddings, others to receptions or retirement ceremonies or military changes of command. When people send out these beautifully engraved invitations, they typically request the honor of the recipient’s presence, as though they were all dressed up waiting in a lavish hall, watching for their honored guests to walk through the entrance. In reality, though, the event typically takes precedence over the presence of the guests. Is our language a relic of antiquated etiquette? Have we merely reproduced what is expected of us, or do we really seek to honor our guests? And what about our worship of God? Do we expect the honor of God’s presence as the most important aspect of our gathering?

As Jesus grew up in his native Judaea and made his presence known in the world, the idea of God’s Messiah was revered and honored. The promise of the Messiah was well known in the prophets as one who would restore God’s people Israel as a light to the nations, and would restore Israel’s fortunes as that light. Many people believed that God’s “anointed”—the meaning of the Hebrew title “Messiah”—would be a military leader, like King David, who was enormously successful against Israel’s enemies during his forty-year reign. With all the talk about the imminence of the Messiah as Jesus was coming of age, the natural assumption was that this individual would represent military power against the Roman Empire. As Jesus began his ministry and as more and more people—including his cousin, John the Baptist—associated him with the promised Messiah, it made sense to think of him as the one who would show the Romans who was boss. And so, when Jesus came into a town or taught in a synagogue, the extent to which people welcomed him depended upon whether or not he met their expectations. They requested the honor of his presence only insofar as he satisfied what they wanted from him.

In the sixth chapter of Mark’s Gospel, we find the account of Jesus coming home to Nazareth, where he teaches in the synagogue on the Sabbath. What were the hometown folks expecting? Not, apparently, what Jesus gave them. Mark does not indicate the text from which Jesus taught or what exactly he said. All Mark tells us is that the people who heard Jesus were astounded at what he said, so much so that they had trouble connecting the man they heard with the carpenter’s son they thought they knew. They probably were honored to welcome him into their midst when they found out that he was in town, but there was something about his demeanor, perhaps the authoritative

way he addressed the text for the day, that unnerved them, that made them think that he was trying to be something he wasn't, that he was offering something he could not possibly have come by honestly. Jesus attributes the reaction of his hometown to unbelief. They were astonished at his teaching. He was amazed at their resistance. It was not a happy reunion.

But Jesus does not stay in Nazareth, trying to convince people of his credentials or qualifications. Instead, he takes the focus off of himself and sends his disciples out in twos to villages and towns to cast out demons and heal the sick. He seems keenly aware that many will reject them just as they rejected him. In fact, rejection is what he prepares them to handle as they go out to represent his power and his name. Jesus was able to heal the sick in Nazareth, and his disciples were able to cast out many demons as well as to heal the sick, but the failure to receive the power of God as presented is an undercurrent that Mark does not attempt to cover over. Failure to request or accept the honor of God's presence is a fact of life around us, and a fact of life within each of us.

In our life together as the church, we get used to the routine of worship. We feel at home with its structure and movement, its repeated forms and responses. But what about the presence of God? We learn in 2 Samuel that God's presence was alive and powerful in King David during the years he ruled over Israel. We learn in 2 Corinthians that the Apostle Paul experienced the presence of God in a way he could not describe in words, but that he knew was real and compelling, and from which he received exceptional revelations. Do we expect to be astounded by God in worship? Do we request the honor of God's presence in all its fullness, in a way that will surprise us and astonish us with exceptional revelations? If God is only ever a being that we expect to tame according to our expectations, that we want to exist to satisfy our needs and desires, then we are not really inviting God to be present on God's terms. What we may be asking for is that God will give us what we want, not to surprise us with new life and an overturning of what we want the Kingdom of God to be.

In our worship today, we celebrate a sacrament that represents the presence of God. We have requested the honor of God's presence, and it is here before us. God's own life and being lies here before us in terms that we can understand, the flesh and blood of God incarnate, God with us and for us. And yet, to think that this simple offering of bread and wine is nothing more than a memorial of Christ's sacrifice is to misunderstand the power of God with us. We have requested the honor of God's presence, and it is here with us now in this place. Like the ideals of our nation articulated more than 200 years ago, the ideals of our faith articulated by Jesus require something from us that we might not be willing to give. Our faith is costly, and it calls us to let God take us places and lead us in directions we might not want to go, or do things we might not want to do. What did Jesus say that day to the people of his hometown, the people who watched him grow up and thought that they knew him because they knew his family? We don't know, but it must have challenged them to think of God in a way they had never thought of before. The power of God will always do that. Our response is to hold on tight and let God take us places we would never have imagined.

In this troubled world, if we believe that God is sovereign, we can trust God to administer justice and establish a new realm where there will be no more tears and no more suffering. The question is, are you willing to be agents of God's sovereign justice, trusting that God is using the people of God as instruments of justice and peace? Have you requested the honor of God's presence, and to be used as God's instruments of justice and peace?



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