

“Dust That Clings”
Sermon on July 4th, 2021
Rev. Bob Feeny, Wellesley Village Church

Mark 6:1-13

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 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?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If 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.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

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I’m at the age now that when I run into someone who might have known me in high school, they don’t quite recognize me. On the rare occasion that I wind up in the town where I grew up, Pittsfield, New Hampshire, I have to jog people’s memory. This is not meant to be self-deprecating. I’m not suggesting that I’m old, or that I’m forgettable, just that I’m not the same person I was.

So, I take some solace in seeing Jesus experience the same thing. Jesus comes to his hometown, and the people don’t quite recognize him. *Isn’t that Mary and Joseph’s kid? Isn’t that the carpenter’s boy?* The people he grew up with are offended by the things that he is teaching. *Where did this guy, a Nazorean just like us, get all of these strange ideas?!*

Jesus’ prophetic ministry was good news to many, but to the people who knew him, it was an internal critique that hit a little too close to home. To receive criticism from afar is difficult, but to hear it from within your own community, your own family—that is far more difficult. Mark’s telling complicates how we think about our relationships to the communities that form us.

Today is July Fourth, Independence Day, the day that our nation celebrates its beginnings, and it is a fitting time to consider our own relationships to the places that form us. I suspect that every

person hearing these words has a different relationship to this country. I know that many of you were born here—this has been your home all your life. I know that some of you were not born here—you've had the prophetic eyes to see this country from a unique perspective. I know that some of you have given service to this country—in the military and in other ways too. Our experiences of this place are uniquely our own—nobody has seen the United States exactly as you have. And, simultaneously, we have all experienced this place through our race, our class, our gender, and our culture. The stories we are told and even the stories we tell, are inflected by the complex history of this land.

This land.

That is the thing that we share, I believe. There are any number of things that folks will tell you are quintessentially American. Baseball, apple pie, jazz, to name a few. And yes, if you look within these things, you certainly find through lines that tell the story of America, in some way. You can't understand jazz without understanding the historical forces that forced enslaved African people into contact with European colonizers. Only then can you understand the way that syncopated, improvised West African rhythms found voice in brass instruments, yielding one of America's greatest original contributions to world culture. Only through understanding the migration of Southern Black families from the terror of Jim Crow in the Deep South, can you understand how jazz came to be appropriated by the music industry and became the foundation for rock music. Yes, when you understand the history of jazz, you start to see the history of America.

That history has got to make you wonder—what kind of land could this happen on? What kind of land births something so rich and beautiful, out of something so ugly?

This land, is my land.

That is the complicated reality with which many of us must wrestle. This land that has been the site of such horrible things, the place where so much violence has been carried out, this is our land. It is the place that has shaped us, whether from our birth, or from our interactions with it as insiders and outsiders, there is simply no way to completely detach ourselves from it.

And so, as we have seen, countless people in this country's history have lifted their voices to call us to account for the injustice that has plagued us from the moment European colonizers arrived. These prophetic voices have been at times tolerated, and frequently silenced. Prophets, rising from this land, have been dishonored—the excoriating critique of our nation's native offspring has been too much to bear.

Some have sought their freedom on other shores, but for many, the dust of this land could not be shaken from their sandals. I find that no matter how frustrated I get with this country, no matter how sick its history or its present makes me—I simply cannot shake it. Try as I may to distance myself from this country's history, from its continued hypocrisy—I can only see it as a falling short. I still want to believe that the project of democracy, the promise of liberty and justice for all can be recognized in this place. I cannot give up on that dream for this land because this land is my land.

This land is my land. This land is your land.

That is perhaps the truth we most struggle to tell about this place. That this land on which we stand is not a place to which we are truly native. It is not a land given by God, but one taken by force. This place, the nation called The United States of America occupies the sacred lands of Turtle Island.

Potawatomi author Robin Wall Kimmerer opens her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass* with the story of Skywoman, who fell from the sky and landed on turtle's back. As she fell, she grabbed a handful of seeds, which took root on turtle's back as she danced, sending roots into the mud brought up from the depths by a muskrat. That's the creation story of this place, as told by many of its indigenous peoples. This land that we stand on, the ground on which we have told so many of our own stories and myths, has its own stories to tell—it is not ours to name, nor to keep, nor to abuse.

And yet, try as I may, I can't shake the dust of this place off of my sandals. The thick, rich dark mud that muskrat gave, the South's deep red clay and the fertile soil of the Midwest and the granite of New Hampshire clings relentlessly, never letting go.

Jesus, a prophet among prophets, could do no deed of power in that place that was his own, that place that would not receive him. Jesus, who came to set captives free, and to proclaim good news to the weary and the poor, could do none of that work in the place where he was not received.

Jesus sends the disciples out into the world, and the gospel tells us that they cast out demons, and healed many who were sick. That is the power that is at work, when we receive the good news that prophets bring.

Our history has shown us that prophets are often ignored in this land. The indigenous peoples who have told us all along that there is much we can't know about this land until we are truly ready to hear it speak, the Black voices that have constantly told us to let America be America again, the land that never was yet.

Jesus could do no deed of power, in the place that would not receive him. So long as the people of that place controlled the story of who he was—*Mary's son, the carpenter's boy*—they could not truly hear what he was saying. They could not be set free by the good news of liberation, because they did not have the ears to hear.

As we mark another Fourth of July this year, there are countless voices raised to tell us who we are. To tell us who our forefathers are, to tell us the story of who and what and why and how this nation is, and so long as we only hear the voices telling certain stories—we can do no deed of power.

What deeds of power have we left undone, because we couldn't hear a different story? What good news of liberation have we hid beneath a bushel because we didn't have the words to tell the story?

I pray that this Fourth of July, we might go into this wild, beautiful, beloved land, leaving behind the bread and the stories that keep us comfortable. I pray that we might encounter this place and its many people and its many stories anew, seeing the prophets among us, hearing their words, and joining them in their work to do powerful deeds—becoming co-prophets for justice and co-conspirators for liberation.

Jesus had seen his disciples' blunders. He had seen their faith flagging; he had seen the things they failed to understand. And yet, he sent them into the world, to heal, and to cast out demons. But, they had to let go of that single story of who they were. They had to be more than just Mary's child, or the carpenter's kid. They had to be more than fishermen and day-laborers. They had to hear the new story Jesus was telling them—they had to become disciples.

Beloved, as Christians, we are called to be Christ's hands and feet in this world. Can you imagine, what we will do in this world when we believe *that* story? What deeds of power? What demons might we finally cast out, when we leave behind that old story of who we are, and step into this land transformed by the powerful love of Jesus?

I pray that God would bless this land, from sea to shining sea. Bless us with the humility to see and mend our flaws. Bless us with the courage to confront our history, and to hear and imagine new stories. Bless us with the wisdom to seek true peace in this land, and in every place we go.

God bless you all, and may the dust of this land forever cling to your feet.
Amen.