

I think most of us would agree that we tend to enjoy a good laugh now and again, and often times it can be rather entertaining watching people play practical jokes on others, as long as we aren't the person being messed with. In fact, think of all the shows out there that have featured video clips of people messing with their friends, family, and even complete strangers. Although I can't say for sure which one started them all, as I was doing some research on Google, I discovered that Candid Camera first aired in 1948 and ran all the way until 2014. Most likely it helped pave the way for other similar tv shows featuring practical jokes such as Punk'd, Impractical Jokers, Scare Tactics, and Ridiculousness.

Did you know, though, that back in 2013 the fabulous Betty White hosted her own prank sitcom called, *Off Their Rockers*. Each episode consisted of senior citizens turning the tables on the younger generation, by playing all sorts of tricks, stunts, and practical jokes on them. And each episode started with Mrs. White sitting down with her band of mischief makers at a Kitchen table as they planned out some of the pranks they were going to try to pull off for a laugh. Of course, this image of a group of people meeting together to figure out what their mission is going to be, and what they are going to do out in the community, causes me to think back to today's Gospel from Mark. And although Jesus hadn't been teaching his disciples to commit practical jokes, he had given them a more serious type of mission; to go out two by two in order to heal people, cast out demons, and teach people about God.

This morning the disciples return from their assignments to report to their teacher, and fellow students, everything they had done and taught. Unfortunately, we aren't provided with any specifics as to what types of miracles they had performed, or details regarding the words that they had preached, but perhaps it is better that they are not given to us. We, who continue the apostolic mission, need to determine what we need to do, and teach, in our own time and place –that is,

how do we make use of the authority Jesus has given us to share God's love and forgiveness with the World. We can't simply repeat what the original disciples said and did.

We need to discover, for ourselves, how we can best spread the gospel in our own time and place with our own words and deeds. I believe that part of figuring out how to do this, is for us to learn how to STOP and spend time with one another in worship and in studying God's word, and then by GOING OUT into the areas we live and work to discover what the people who surround us daily actually need. In other words, there are times in our lives when we need to stop and be with Jesus, and other times when we need to go out into the world he created and live out his Gospel message.

While it is a wonderful thing for us to talk about being Disciples of Christ, or being followers of Christ, perhaps it is time we begin to see ourselves as his Apostles. Now I'm willing to bet that most of us know what the word means, but as a reminder it is more than a technical term or a title, it is actually a noun that refers to "People who are sent out with a message." This would appear to apply to us right? Jesus calls us to go out and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

Douglas John Hall, in his book *Why Christian*, has a chapter called "*Why Church?*." As part of his answer to the question of why we are called to go out, he writes: "Christianity does have a mission to the world, and that mission is the most basic reason for the existence of the church. There are religions (some would claim that Judaism is one of them) that do not have a missionary impulse in them; but Christianity has been pushed out into the world from the beginning, like a little fledgling bird nudged out of its cozy nest by its parents.

He goes on to state, "the mission of the church is of central importance to our Christian faith, so much that it constitutes the most basic reason why the

church must exist. Of course, the church needs to have periods of retreat from the world, to recover its own identity through study, prayer, to renew its courage, and so on. But precisely in these times of renewal, the church learns once more that it does not exist for its own sake.”

Our Lord and Savior, calls us to go out and spread God’s word to the people we encounter each day. We are called to be like the disciples, to learn from Jesus and from one another, to grow in our understanding of our faith, to rest up, to stop for a bit, and then to go out, over and over, and over again! As I was thinking about today’s story a thought occurred to me.... Perhaps we can understand God’s message of love for the world better when we get in the habit of following Jesus command to go out! There is something about seeing one’s faith in action.

When we go to a place like Friendship House here in Mount Vernon and serve a meal to an individual in need, we begin to witness firsthand God’s love working in us and through us! But, as we observe in Mark’s Gospel, there are times when we do need to stop in order to be refreshed, renewed, so that we can allow all that we have seen and done to sink in. We also need to stop so that we can be nourished by Jesus. This week’s story is missing the feeding of the 5,000, which (spoiler alert) we will read about next week, but we can assume that the disciples, and all the people who were fed by the loaves of bread and fish, were also fed by God’s words spoken to them by Jesus!

Rest is important! Just think about the purpose of a vacation, a day off! Our bodies need rest in order to function properly. If we keep working and working without taking a break we can get burnt out, we can get sick, and in some instances without rest, we might die! The same is true with regards to our faith! We need to go out and live it, but we also need to take time to breathe in, to listen, to learn, and rest in God’s Word. We also are called to go out, not just because our teacher tells us to, but because the people in this world are like sheep without a shepherd!

And just look at what happens with sheep who have no shepherd! They wander off, they do whatever they like, and usually end up being a meal for some type of carnivore. Or they get hurt or lost. I image there are a lot of people like that all around us, and that is why we are called by Jesus to be Apostles, to go out into the World to help lead the lost back to God, and we can often do this by living out our faith in our daily lives. Consider the following story.

A group of salesmen went to a regional sales convention in Chicago. After the convention was over as they were rushing through the airport, one of the salesmen inadvertently kicked over a table, which held a large display of apples. Apples flew everywhere, but because they were in a hurry the men continued on without stopping or looking back, and they all managed to reach the plane in time for their nearly missed boarding. **ALL BUT ONE !!!** He paused, took a deep breath, and experienced a twinge of compassion for the girl whose apple stand had been overturned. He then told his buddies to go on without him and asked them to explain to his wife why he was taking a later flight.

Afterwards he returned to the terminal where the apples were all over the terminal floor. He was glad he did. The 16-year-old girl who had been selling them from the cart was totally blind! She was softly crying, tears running down her cheeks in frustration, and at the same time helplessly groping for her spilled produce as the crowd swirled about her. No one stopped to help her, and no one seemed to care about her plight.

The salesman knelt on the floor with her, gathered up the apples, put them back on the table and helped organize her display. As he did this, he noticed that many of them had become battered and bruised; these he set aside in another basket. When he had finished, he pulled out his wallet and said to the girl, "Here, please take this \$40 for the damage we did. Are you okay?"

She nodded through her tears. He continued on with, "I hope we didn't spoil your day too badly." As the salesman started to walk away, the bewildered blind girl called out to him, "Mister...." He paused and turned to look back into those blind eyes. She continued, "Are you Jesus?" He stopped in mid-stride, and began to ponder what she had just said. Then slowly he made his way to catch the later flight with that question burning and bouncing about in his soul: "Are you Jesus?"

Imagine if we cared for others in a similar way. If we got to know people, if we helped them when they are in need, and were willing to stop every once in a while, especially when our lives appear to be filled with so many things to do. The disciples thought they were escaping to a "deserted place" with Jesus. Instead, they had a short, restful boat trip, and then witnessed the miracle of Jesus (the Good Shepherd) feeding over 5,000 people and afterwards they saw the divine Christ walking on water with their very own eyes. Which experience do you think left the disciples more rested and refreshed in spirit? God was present both in their time of resting when they stopped and was also present in their "going."

Ever been so tired that all you wanted to do was sit and zone out in front of the television? Too beat to even concentrate, you don't watch anything but spend all your time channel surfing from one video image to another. After about a half-hour of this, you're so exhausted all you can do is stagger off to bed. For Christians who live always fully immersed in "God's time," moments of rest and relaxation don't necessarily constitute "downtime." Rather we can see them as our "uptime," the time we take to refresh our spirits and breathe in more deeply the presence of the Divine.