

## **Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel**

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### **FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Mark 6:7–13. In this text we read of how Jesus sent the Twelve on mission to do the same works our Lord was doing: proclaim the Kingdom of God, deliver people from the forces of evil, and heal their suffering. These ministries remain part of the Church’s fundamental mission even today. Let’s study this passage so that we can better understand how it challenges us to grow in discipleship and mission.

It is interesting that Jesus sent the disciples on mission while they were still being formed by the Lord. We might think that the disciples needed much more training and education before they could be sent to do the works of Jesus. After all, at this point in the Gospel the Twelve had been with Jesus for only a few weeks or so. We like to be fully prepared and credentialed before we are sent out on our own to accomplish a great work. That was true in much of the ancient world as well (remember that Aristotle spent twenty years learning from Plato before he founded his own school). In light of such lengthy times of preparation the Twelve must have felt very ill-equipped for the mission entrusted to them. However, Jesus knew that being a disciple is different from being a philosopher. Disciples can only grow as they practice and share what they themselves are in the process of receiving. Discipleship is not a program of study from which we graduate and are somehow certified for ministry; rather, discipleship can only move to a deeper level when we have learned to minister to others even as Jesus has ministered to us. Jesus called the disciples to Himself in Mark 3:13–14 for the explicit purpose that He could send them forth on mission. Now after hearing His teaching and watching His mighty works they were sent in fulfillment of the purpose for which they were first called. This passage is telling us that all disciples are, in fact, missionaries. Sometimes we can find ourselves wondering why we are not able to go deeper in our own discipleship, and this passage asks us to reflect on how well we have shared with others what we have already received. If we are keeping our experiences of faith enrichment and spiritual insights to ourselves then we are not fulfilling our missionary role as disciples.

How have you experienced Jesus’ teaching enlightening you, and what are your opportunities to share that enlightenment with others?

How have you experienced the Lord liberating you from evil influences, and who might need to experience that liberation through you?

What healing has Jesus effected in your life (physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual) and what are your opportunities to assist others in their healing process?

When have you experienced growth in your discipleship because you willingly shared with others what you yourself were receiving from the Lord?

Jesus then instructs the Twelve and prepares them for their journey. The word for “journey” is most accurately translated as “way” and indicates the original name for disciples of the Lord: they were known as “Followers of the Way” (see Acts 22:4, 9:2). The use of that word means that Jesus is not just giving an instruction for a temporary missionary journey but that the Lord is

giving a lasting teaching on how disciples are to always carry out their ministry. The purpose of the walking stick was for support and protection as well as being a symbol of power and authority (see the staff Moses and Aaron carried). The commandment to bring no bread, no beggar's bag, and no money in their belt was to remind them of their need to rely on divine providence. The beggar's bag in particular was prohibited so as to distinguish the Twelve from other travelling philosophers and miracle workers (healers) who charged for their services and profited from their ministry. Jesus did not want His disciples to be people who sought personal gain from the ministry of the Gospel.

They were also to not wear two tunics, which may seem strange to us, and we need to remember that a tunic was an expression of who a person was (clothes were symbols of identity). The prohibition against bringing two tunics may very well have been an effort to prevent the Twelve from portraying multiple, confused, or even conflicting identities in their discipleship. It can be easy for us to have multiple aspects to our own identities based on nationality, religious confession, race, profession, family roles, civic involvements, and sports interests. This prohibition against bringing "two tunics" may be a challenge for us to define ourselves first and foremost as disciples of Jesus in every situation. Every other aspect of our identity is of lesser priority and should never confuse that primary identity.

Lastly, they were to wear sandals, which is a direct connection to how the Israelites were instructed to eat the Passover meal in preparation for their exodus from Egypt. This final command to wear sandals, in conjunction with the command to carry a staff (walking stick), implies that the Twelve were being sent by Jesus to announce a new exodus from slavery to freedom in the Christian way of life. This new exodus was the beginning of the new People of God (the Church) formed by the Twelve (representing and reconstituting the Twelve Tribes of Israel) in response to the rejection Jesus experienced in his hometown (see Mk 6:1-6).

How does the Church today continue the ministry of leading us in a new exodus from slavery to freedom?

How does the image of carrying the staff (walking stick) help you to understand, interpret, and appreciate the ministry of the local bishop who carries a staff (crosier) as a symbol of his office?

In what ways are we tempted to rely on our own strength rather than God's providence for the success of our ministry and of the Church?

How are you reminded in practical ways that God is in control of your life?

How can the desire for personal gain by those entrusted with leadership responsibility diminish the credibility of the Gospel and effectiveness of ministry today?

In what ways can our discipleship be compromised when other identities are allowed to be of equal or greater importance than being a disciple of Jesus (Particularly, when we try to wear "two tunics")?

Jesus ends His commission to the Twelve by instructing them on how to deal with both success and failure in their mission. When their message is received, they are to remain in that place and continue their ministry. It is only when their mission is unfruitful that they are to move on so that the proclamation of the Kingdom of God can continue. The reality is that the Twelve will experience both success and failure. Jesus does not want them to be surprised by that reality but

to be prepared for it and to anticipate their response to it. The action of “shaking the dust from your feet” was practiced in Acts 13:51 as a warning to the people of Pisidian Antioch. This instruction acknowledges that even with the best efforts of the Twelve there will always be some people who freely choose to reject the message of the Gospel. Such rejection is not necessarily a sign of failure on the part of missionaries but of human freedom and hardness of heart. When confronted with such situations, the Twelve are encouraged to seek out other groups that will be receptive to their message rather than wasting additional time and resource trying to convert unwelcoming or unreceptive communities. This is an important message for us. We need to remember that not all of our missionary efforts will be effective or successful. Failure and rejection will be a part of the Church’s experience today just as it was the experience of Jesus and the Twelve. Rather than focusing our efforts, attention, and resources in ministries that are not working, this passage encourages us to re-focus our efforts in new ways that may be more effective. It can be safe and predictable to keep doing the same old thing, but when the same old thing isn’t working, it is time to change and grow. The Church has a responsibility to be creative and persevering in its efforts to bring the Gospel to all people. We cannot accomplish that mission if we are intent on continuing unsuccessful or unfruitful efforts.

How do you know when it is time to “move on” in your efforts to share the Gospel with others?

What ministries of the Church are most successful in proclaiming the Kingdom of God?

What ministries of the Church need to be re-focused so they can become more effective in accomplishing the goal of evangelization?

How do you know when your best efforts have been put forth in a particular mission effort?

Who are the “other communities” around you that are waiting to hear the Gospel through you?

Lastly, this passage is an important opportunity to reflect on the ministry of the Twelve when they “anointed many sick people with oil”. This practice is also described in James 5:14–15 as part of the healing ministry of the early Church. Today we celebrate the Sacrament of the Sick by anointing with oil as well. Oil is the visible sign of the invisible healing grace of Christ. Oil (primarily olive oil) has natural properties that can assist in the healing process (see Lk 10:34 where oil was used to heal the wounds of the injured man in the Parable of the Good Samaritan). When people suffer a debilitating illness (physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual) then they experience loss of freedom, vulnerability, fear, isolation, and even abandonment. The practice of ritual anointing, and the prayer of the Church, gives strength, encouragement, healing, and spiritual grace to assist the person in their distress. It also assures them that the community of faith is standing by them in their illness and supporting them with their prayers. This prayerful support of the faith community is an important aid in helping a sick person experience weakness in a faithful way so as to grow in trusting dependence on God and others. The grace received in the Anointing of the Sick offers salvation and healing on a variety of levels.

How have you experienced the grace of the Anointing of the Sick?

What fears or temptations have you experienced when you suffered serious illness or weakness?

How can the prayer of the Church and this Sacrament help us overcome our fears

and temptations?

This passage tells us that the Twelve both anointed people and healed them which implies two actions (one liturgical and one physical). Why do you think Mark wanted us to distinguish between the Sacramental act of anointing and the physical act of healing people?