

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
July 4, 2021

I really enjoyed getting to spend the evening recently with an old college friend and her four-year-old son. Her son was inquisitive, smart, and energetic. He wanted to climb and dance and eat cake. I really enjoyed watching him and his mom interact.

I noticed, though, that when he and I were having a conversation, I wanted to ask him “So, what do you want to be when you grow up?” This is a pretty normal question. I was asked it as a child a hundred times, and I’m sure as an adult I’ve asked it a hundred times.

But on deeper reflection, I wondered what it was I was really asking? What do you want to be when you grow up? I know that in our society, we ascribe different values — in terms of money and in terms of cachet — to different kinds of work. So, if he had said, “I want to work in a dry cleaner” I may have had a different attitude toward his answer than if he had said, “I want to be a doctor.” So, in a way, when I was thinking about asking him what he wanted to be when grew up, I really didn’t want to know what he wanted to be. Instead, I wanted to know how I should be treating him — either with some pride or maybe with some worry.

By making the question of his occupation the most important thing I asked, I also was giving him the impression that BE and DO are the same thing. When I ask him what he wants to BE when he grows up, I really mean, what work do you want to participate in. Which, really, is only a very small part of what it means to be a human in this world, even though it is constantly the first thing I am asked after my name when I meet someone new.

As I was thinking about this silly question: what do you want to be when you grow up, I couldn’t help but think of all the better questions that I could have asked my friend’s son. What kind of person do you want to be? Who do you want to help when you grow up? What sounds fun to do when you are an adult? What kind of God do you hope to follow? And, most importantly for this sermon: **who do you want to be with** when you grow up?

Today’s text is from the gospel of Mark — a gospel filled with Jesus and the disciples jetting around the ancient world, healing and preaching and casting out demons. It’s kind of like a thriller that you buy at the airport — quick-paced and a page-turner.

And the passage this morning is no different. We hear the neighbors in Galilee gossiping about Mary and Joseph’s son. We hear that famous teaching from Jesus that a prophet is never welcome in her hometown. And then, in an explosion of energy, we hear that the disciples are running all over the countryside preaching and healing.

Those are the big moments in the story. But this morning, I want to look at a much smaller moment — at three words that come in the middle of the passage: two by two. Jesus sent out these disciples two by two. And I am absolutely fascinated by this. To be a disciple of Jesus is to

walk with others. The entire model of ministry for the church since the day it was formed is to be doing this work in relationships with other people.

I'm not sure how it is in other countries, but I actually think that in ours, we have an over-emphasis on the achievements of the individual. It's almost like we think that people are raised and then live in a vacuum of either success or failure. What do you want to be when you grow up? I want to be a fireman. What if the answer was something more like "I want to fight fires with friends." I know that some of this is semantics, but words have power. An amazing amount of power.

And the way that we, in our culture, talk about success, about adulthood, about work all seems to have to do with the individual. And I think that Jesus is offering a model of the church that flies in the face of that. I am not a disciple without you, and you are not a disciple without me. I won't make you look around in the pews, since we are Episcopalians, but if you did, what you would see are rows and rows of people who are disciples alongside you, who are your two by two. In fact, if you ask a little kid what they want to be when they grow up, they cannot answer "disciple." Because you cannot be a disciple alone. It is a contradiction in terms.

So, what is the good news here? That you're joined at the hip to the people in this room? I think the good news is that you are, in the most fundamental sense, not alone in this life nor in this ministry. You are baptized into a family. You are fed as a family. You sing and pray and serve the poor as a family. And that is absolutely intrinsic to your identity as a disciple of Jesus. You have been sent two by two, never alone.

I wish I could go back to every little kid I've ever asked "what do you want to do when you grow up" and rephrase my question. I now realize that I really don't care too much what kind of work they are going to do. What I want to know about them, and about all the children in this parish is WITH WHOM are you going to do your ministry in the world? Who is your two by two? They can be astronauts. A garbage man or a dinosaur for all I care. I want to know that these children are following Jesus linked arm and arm with all the saints before and after who have had the audacity to walk in the footsteps of Christ. So, the good news, St. Mark's is that you're all stuck together and there's not a thing you can do about it. To God be the glory. Amen.