**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC July 5, 2015**

***Shake Off the Dust***

**A Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett for Independence Day Weekend**

**WELCOME**

Good morning, and welcome to worship at West Center Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, on this Sunday of American Independence Day Weekend. Happy Birthday, United States of America!

**THE NOW TESTAMENT WITNESS**

This morning, in addition to the Old Testament Witness and the Gospel Witness, we have a Now Testament Witness, a poem called “Surrender” by Sarah Agnew, which was first published in 2013. The poem is from our *Seasons of the Spirit* Church Curriculum. The poem speaks of losing ourselves and finding ourselves in faith. Jeanne Stano is reading for us this morning. *(The poem may be found at the end of this sermon.)*

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Mark 6:1-13,

The Gospel Witness for today tells the story of Jesus being rejected by those in his hometown who knew his family and had known Jesus as a boy and later as a carpenter. Jesus is amazed at their unbelief and leaves Nazareth to teach and preach at other villages, where he expects that people will be more receptive to his message.

**SERMON**

Today’s Gospel Witness makes a good point: none of us, not even Jesus, can please all of the people all of the time!

You might think that Jesus’ hometown folks would be proud of Jesus and carry him on their shoulders through the streets. Hometown boy makes good!

But no. Jesus’ fellow townspeople take no pride in him. When Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, his neighbors take offense: they take offense at Jesus’ faith, at his knowledge, at his confidence, as his reported ability to heal.

“Just who does he think he is?” they ask each other. “Jesus is no different and certainly no better than we are. He has a mother, brothers and sisters, just like we do. He’s human. He is no Messiah! No way!”

*“And Jesus 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 among the (other) villages, teaching.”* (Mark 6:5-6)

The key teaching for us in today’s Gospel Witness is that Jesus does not stick around, trying to convince the doubters and the naysayers. Jesus recognizes that his is a problem that all prophets face: prophets are respected, held in high esteem, honored in many places --- except in their own hometown.

It may even be that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Jesus’ brothers and sisters thought that Jesus was stepping over a line, speaking as a prophet, as a rabbi, as a teacher, when all he really is is their son and brother, a carpenter, like his father before him.

Jesus sees that he is getting nowhere in his hometown, and he knows that his days on earth are limited, and that he has work to do. So Jesus leaves Nazareth and heads to the surrounding villages to teach and preach, heal and baptize for the forgiveness of sins.

But Jesus doesn’t go alone. He doesn’t take any of his biological family members, but he does take his intentional family, his family of choice, with him.

*“Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.”* (Mark 6:7)

Jesus tells his disciples to take nothing with them for their journey. Like Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Jesus expects the disciples to “Always rely on the kindness of strangers.”

And if the strangers are not kind, Jesus tells the disciples exactly how to react: *“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.”* (Mark 6:11)

By telling the disciples “to shake off the dust,” Jesus is saying in effect, “If any place won’t give you a hearing, don’t waste your time. Take nothing from them, not even the dust on your feet, and go on, go on to a more receptive audience. Or at least find a more open audience, where our message of God’s love and forgiveness will be heard and can make a difference in people’s lives.”

And you know, this story of Jesus teaching his disciples to “shake the dust off your feet,” is a lesson for us too. Jesus is also teaching us that it’s necessary to leave and go elsewhere if things just aren’t working out. Jesus tells us to say, “Thanks, anyway,” and then go on, go on into the rising sun, looking forward rather than backwards, where the sun is setting.

If not even Jesus can please all of the people all of the time, how can we possibly think that we can do so? Why waste our time and energy planting seeds if the soil is thin, rocky and dry? There is rich, moist soil ahead, soil that we can find and claim, if we are determined.

And isn’t it interesting how the Gospel of Mark says that Jesus was amazed at the unbelief in his hometown? Jesus wasn’t stupefied or angry or bitter at the unbelief. Those emotions wouldn’t do Jesus, nor would they do us, any good. It’s better to be amazed, to say “Wow! Isn’t that something?” and then go on our way to other villages, other situations.

And looking at our own situation, I don’t know that the compilers of the Lectionary of Bible Readings planned this Gospel reading for American Independence Day Weekend, but I think it’s perfectly perfect.

Things just weren’t working out between the colonists in America and the royalists in England, particularly with King George III. And the colonists wanted to do something about it.

On July 4, 1776, the signers of the Declaration of Independence made treasonous statements and literally put their John Hancock underneath them. Near the end of the document it says:

*In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.*

The American Revolutionaries, both male and female, did not wait around and hope things might change for the better. After crossing the stormy Atlantic or being born on the rocky shores of America, the colonists had new expectations of what was possible in this new land. They had ideas and ideals and luckily, they also Thomas Jefferson, to put their ideas and ideals into words, words that have inspired people throughout the generations:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all (men) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. -- That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted (among Men), deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed;*

Upon signing the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying, “We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.” *(Quoted as an anecdote in The Works of Benjamin Franklin**(1840) by Jared Sparks.)*

There would be no turning back. Our forebears had shaken the dust of merry old England from their feet. And so can we, when we aren’t being heard and our ideals demand it. Happy Independence Day!

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE** “This Is My Song” Jean Sibelius & Lloyd Stone

Our Hymn of Response this morning is a patriotic hymn for all the nations, The tune is *Finlandia*. The words are by Lloyd Stone, who wrote them in 1934 between World War I and World War II, expressing a hope for world peace.

*Surrender*

I made a choice/ to step into the river/ bubbling, tumbling, calling/calling – listen!/

come with me!

the water isn’t deep/ where I have chosen/

to step/into the river/ and I can stand/steady

 on my own

 ripples/splashing at my shins/gently/

coaxing/

 come a little closer!

The water is enticing/and my confidence/

Increasing/ so I choose/ my direction/

and take another step

 a little deeper

the river’s flow is getting stronger/ standing that much harder/ the water tugs

at my legs/ another step/and it laps

around my waist

standing in this river/ its invitation roaring at me now/ I cannot stay/

gratefully – suddenly/ I surrender/ enter/ the river’s fresh embrace/

 I lose myself

 am found

in the life flow of/ the River

*by Sarah Agnew, 2013*

West Center Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

101 Pondfield Road West

Bronxville, NY 10708

914-337-3829

westcenterucc@verizon.net www.westcenterchurch.org