**Text**: **Mark 6: 1-13**

 **The Bethel Pulpit**

 **Pastor John O. Swanson**

 **July 8, 2018 – Seventh Sunday of Pentecost** On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org/)
 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Monday morning, June 25, thirty-eight Bethel youth and adult leaders boarded a bus bound for Houston, Texas to attend the 2018 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s National Youth Gathering. We arrived in Houston on Tuesday - late afternoon – and had time to get settled and spend some time as a group. The next day, we went to the NRG stadium – home of the Houston Texans – and together with 31,204 other Lutheran youth and adult leaders from around the United States we took part in an amazing opening to the Gathering.

The theme for the Gathering was “this changes everything” and the primary scripture passage was one of the two Scripture passages I have tacked up on my bulletin board in my office, Ephesians 2:8. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” Each day there was a sub theme – God’s call changes everything, God’s love changes everything, God’s grace changes everything, God’s hope changes everything, and Jesus changes everything.

Each day we had a unique focus. Thursday was our synod day. So, we spent time with the 700 some other youth that came from our own synod here in southern Wisconsin – the South Central Wisconsin Synod.

Friday was our service day. Our Bethel group and another church group were sent to a Methodist Church, where we did some painting, polishing, cleaning, and shoveling.

Saturday was our day to go the NRG convention center - which is right next to the NRG stadium and the old Astro Dome – and experience the interactive area. This took up the entire first floor of the NRG convention center and was such a large area that you could not see from one end to the other. In the interactive area there were all sorts of stuff to see, do, touch, experience, and learn about.

* Old Lutheran (silly on-line store selling silly Lutheran stuff) had a massive space, where they were selling shirts, hats, buttons, coffee cups, water bottles, etc. all related in one way or another to Lutheranism.
* There were 2 Habitat for Humanity Homes being built (which were then going to be moved to their permanent location).
* There was a section where you could donate blood and another where you could donate your hair.
* Lutheran colleges and seminaries had representatives there to talk to young people about their schools.
* There were bumper cars and a miniature golf course.
* There was a recreation area where you could play kick ball and soccer and dodge ball areas.
* And there were endless interactive learning areas where you could go to learn about what the ELCA is doing in the United States and throughout the world to help fight racism, hunger, poverty, sickness, and so much more.

An event like that takes years to plan (the next Gathering is in Minneapolis in 2021 and plans have already begun), but the impact that it has on those who attend is well worth all the time, all the effort, all the money. I have attended three Gatherings now – New Orleans, Detroit and Houston – and they are some of the most moving and meaningful and powerful moments of my ministry. The beautiful vision of lives touched in such positive, loving, and grace-filled ways can lead a person to believe that life as a beloved child of God can indeed change everything.

As the 31,242 of us gathered in the NRG stadium on Sunday morning, July 1st, for our closing worship (worship, by the way, that included communion for everyone!), as we were doing that, Pastor Margo preached here at Bethel.

I understand that she preached about lamenting – about how we can find ourselves crying out in frustration at different moments in our lives because we feel alone, because we feel isolated, because we feel as if all hope is gone, because we feel abandoned. So we cry out – we lament. “God why is my child sick? Why did lose my job? Why is my marriage in the toilet? Why do I feel so horribly alone? Why God, why, why, why.?

The message that we got in Houston might seem to be 100% different than the message you got up here last Sunday. But I am not so sure.

In our Gospel for today we find Jesus entering his hometown synagogue to teach – this was the place where everyone knew him from the time he was a child. And while at first were they were impressed – they were astounded – they quickly turned on him. The Gospel does not say why – whether it was something he said or the tone of his voice or something else, we do not know – but something led the listeners to begin to berate Jesus, “Who does he think he is, saying these things to us?!”

Because of this intense negativity, because of this overwhelming lack of faith, the Gospel writer tells us that “Jesus wasn’t able to do much of anything there …”

Such an experience seems lament-worthy to me. After that, one could easily understand if Jesus needed some time to get away – maybe to go up on a mountain by himself and to pray and to re-think his whole strategy and purpose. But Jesus did not do anything like that. Instead, Jesus boldly sends the disciples out, two by two, to go to the places he plans to go to heal the sick and to proclaim repentance to all whom they encountered.

This Nazareth story is really intriguing to me. The impact that the people of his home town – some even his own family – has on Jesus does do something to him – it affects him at some level. Yes, he moves on and does not seem to skip a beat, but their absolute lack of faith seems to confound him. There is something about their level of indifference – their unbelief – that is staggering and alarming.

I guess I am drawn to this passage, ultimately, because this level of unbelief/indifference is something that we are all far too familiar with. We are living in a Nazareth world – we are living in a culture that is disinterested in Jesus. We live in a world that seems completely tuned out to Jesus’ message of love and grace, mercy and acceptance. But that disinterest, that indifference, that unbelief is not just acted out/played out/lived out by “those people” who do not go to church – we are guilty as well.

It seems that even those of us who are Christian tend to have this indifference far too often. In fact, it seems that often times our focus on Jesus takes place in one of two ways. First, we focus in on Jesus at Christmas. Jesus the baby is approachable, loveable, cute, and cuddly. Do you remember Ricky Bobby in Talladega Nights – he only prayed to the baby Jesus because that was the image he liked. He is not alone – the baby Jesus is the one image that seems most approachable to many of us.

And then we focus in on Jesus at those moments of lament that Pastor Margo was talking about last week. We cry out to Jesus for a miracle when every other option has failed and we are at our wits end. We beg Jesus to dramatically change our future because we have routinely ignored him in our past.

We Christians struggle with this disconnect from Jesus on a far too regular basis. We come to church and make our confessions and say our prayers, but we each are pulled away from Jesus and drawn to our own little world far too quickly and far too often. Our own self interest, which takes us down all sorts of paths - some good, some bad - (our self interest) is much more of a pull, too much of the time. And that pull draws us away from loving, serving and representing Jesus. We profess faith in Jesus, but at least at times, our actions and our words in the real world can seem to suggest otherwise.

The first night that we were in Houston – on Tuesday night – our Bethel group of 38 youth and adults crammed into one of our hotel rooms for evening devotions.

Elisabeth, Bethel’s youth director, placed three candles before us – a small candle, a medium candle and a large candle. She asked us to imagine that these three candles represented a person’s closeness – his or her connectedness – to God. The little one suggested a really strong connection, the medium one suggested a decent connection, and the large one suggested a very limited, often times distant, and connection. She then asked to share, one by one, which candle we would pick to described our current connection to God and explain why we picked it. (As a side note – can you imagine a group of 38 adults being asked to do this same thing – we would all scream out, “That’s too personal!)

These young people had no problem with doing what Elisabeth had asked. One person after another said that their connection to Jesus was best represented by the medium or large candle. My heart kind of sank – kind of broke – as I heard these young people – most of whom I confirmed and some of whom I baptized – say things like, “I am picking the big candle because I really don’t go to church that much, I don’t really pray and when I am at home or at school I really don’t think about God.” Those or similar words were spoken over and over again.

Finally it came time for me to speak up. I said, “As the Acting Lead Pastor of Bethel Lutheran Church I really feel like I should say that my connection to God is best represented by that little candle … but if I said that I would be lying and I don’t want to do that to all of you. In truth if being connected to God is up to me I would have to say that the big candle best represents me. But,” I went on, “I have a mark on my forehead and I know all of you do as well – in fact I put it on some of you. It is a holy mark – and even though you cannot see it, God sees it. God sees it when you are at home, when you are at school, when you are at Bethel … God sees it wherever you are. And that mark, which was given to you and to me at our baptism, says God is 100% connected to us, even though you and I do not always feel connected to God. So because of that mark – because of God – I claim that little candle. And I claim it for all of you as well. That mark changes everything!”

The danger in the phrase that was the theme for the Houston National Youth Gathering – “This changes everything” – is that it might make us think that as followers of Jesus our lives will somehow drastically and dramatically change. I think that happens because we tend to focus on the wrong word in that phrase – we are hoping for exciting change to happen. But the powerful word in that phrase is not “change” but “this.”

“This” changes everything.

“This” being Jesus and everything related to him – his birth as a cute little baby, his life, his teachings, his compassion, his kindness, his openness, his healing, his suffering, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, his presence with us in the bread and the wine, his promise to be with us throughout our lives – all of that is “this.”

We are children of God – marked with the cross of Christ on our foreheads. Yes, we stumble from time to time, yes, we turn away from God at other times yes, we are indifferent far too often. But ours is a God of great love, who sent his Son to live, to die, and to rise for us. God in Christ changes everything. Amen