

Before there was Wii and before there were ipods and before there were iphones and before there were computer games and video games, there was pinball. And before there was internet and Twitter and Facebook, there were newspapers. Well I guess there still are newspapers.

I just read a story about a man recalling a childhood experience he had which involved pinball machines and newspapers. The man, named Bobby, recalled how when he was a small kid, his dad sent him on an errand to pick up the daily paper for his dad at a local hangout called "Joe's lunch." It was an easy enough mission and Bobby felt rather important that his dad would trust him to bring home the paper he loved to read after dinner.

Should be no problem - right?

Wrong. Joe's Lunch was a dangerous place. Joe's Lunch was a dangerous place because there was a pinball machine at Joe's Lunch. This pinball machine was the very first pinball machine in their small mining town in Northern Ontario, Canada. All the kids were gathering at Joe's Lunch to see this amazing new toy that promised lots of fun for only a nickel. But there was something else that cost a nickel. You guessed it. Also costing a nickel was the newspaper.

When Bobby entered the hang-out, there were four or five kids standing around the pinball machine and his friend Jimmy Turner was taking his turn. Bobby squeezed into the group and watched in amazement as the silver ball went this way and that, setting off bells and whistles. Jimmy was really good at using the flipper to knock the ball all the way back to the top of the game. While Bobby watched, he could feel that the nickel he was clutching was beginning to burn a hole in his hand.

Then it happened!

Jimmy's turn was over and he turned to Bobby and asked, "*Want to try?*" Jackie Scott didn't like that Jimmy was going to let Bobby play before the others -- but no one would actually stand up to Jimmy. Before Bobby knew it, his nickel was delivered to the hungry mouth of the pinball game.

There were some important lessons learned that day. The game was actually no fun at all for Bobby. He played with anxiety as he pictured going home to his father with no newspaper. Bobby was given a mission but Bobby chose not to act on what he was supposed to do that day. Bobby got sidetracked by something that seemed more alluring.

We have begun talking in this congregation about how we are called out on a mission as well. We have begun talking, studying, listening to one another, listening to God, and listening to God's Word for guidance in figuring out one important ministry endeavor that we are called on to undertake with the larger community. Some of you have communicated to me that you have a sense that God is calling you to something important but you have not quite figured out what that calling is.

We resumed our reading of the gospel Mark today and we zoom forward into chapter 6 before returning to chapter 2 in Mark next weekend. We have been reading through the gospel of Mark over the past few weeks and paying attention to what we are being called out to be doing in ministry as individuals and as a congregation and as a larger community. Today's Scripture gives us guidance in how to go out into the larger community.

After being rejected in his own hometown, Jesus sends out his disciples into the villages. In this text of Scripture there are 5 elements that are very clear in what Jesus asks of his followers.

The first element of this calling that we discover in this reading is that the disciples are sent out to other places. They are not called to just hang out with people they know but they are called out to unknown places. One of the biggest problems with the organized church today is that we have become very inward focused. We talk about "our church, our kids, and our ministries." Organized churches have become clubs where people join in order to be insiders while others are outsiders.

But Jesus doesn't call out these followers to take care of themselves. He calls them out to other villages. As we contemplate what one thing we are called into, we must keep in mind that we are not called to be inward in our thinking but outward in our action.

The second element in this story is that Jesus sends them out in pairs. Jesus seems to think that it is better to face challenges with a partner than it is to face it alone. So as we think about the one thing we are called to undertake, we need to be mindful of Allison Creek's adopted theme of "Building Through Community."

Ministry as lone rangers is not biblical. We are to be with partners who support and encourage one another in our ministry tasks. So as we contemplate ministry opportunities we are to go out and we are to have partners.

The third element of this story of these disciples being called out into ministry is that they are called to go to unclean places. That may be a tough one for some of us. We only want to go into places that are comfortable or that we know the language or we know what to expect. But the disciples here are given authority over unclean spirits. We are called to go out into places which we may judge as unfit but that may be the place where God is calling us.

The fourth element in this story is that the disciples are told to pack lightly. They are not to carry a bunch of stuff with them that can become a burden. What are some of the extra baggage that we may want to take along with us? We may take along our attitudes that we know what is right and we have nothing to learn from others. We may take along our traditions that say that our way is the only way to do something.

And we may take along our acquired stuff that we think we need but we don't really need. Jesus' disciples only needed a staff, one pair of sandals, and the clothes on their back. We can leave our baggage behind as well.

And the 5th and final element from this story is that sometimes you will do all the right things and be rejected. At which point Jesus says to dust off your feet and head off to the next town. We are to take chances with a sense that we may fail. But failure doesn't keep us from trying.

Today is the weekend we celebrate the independence of our country. This nation was founded by people who were willing to take chances with the knowledge that they may fail. The ideals of this country have been defended by people who took risks even though they knew they may fail. As Americans we are people who take risks when we believe something is important.

As we seek to listen and discern what one thing God is calling us to do with the larger community, remember the elements from this story.

We are to go out, we are to go with partners, we are to seek out unclean places, we are to pack lightly, and we are to be willing to fail.

On this mission, may God give us the strength to be faithful. AMEN.

-Opening illustration author is unknown but it can be found at http://www.lectionarysermons.com/jul_09_00.htm

-Text: Mark 6: 1-13

-Given: July 5, 2009 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)