**That’s Crazy Talk!**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

The 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

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In January of 2006, I went on a two-week pilgrimage to Israel and Palestine. I am sure that over the years ahead of us, I’ll have occasion to tell more than a few stories about this trip, because visiting these ancient sites profoundly shaped how I think about God, and Jesus and the Bible. But this trip also profoundly changed how I think about being a Christian today, because of the kinds of Christians I met in the Holy Lands: people living as a member of a very minority religion within a landscape of tense, prolonged faith-based conflict.

In particular I remember meeting one woman, a Christian in her late forties, who was living in a remote Palestinian village in the West Bank. I can’t remember her name, but I have a vivid image in my mind of what she looked like. She was an American from suburban Virginia, outside of DC. For a decade or more she had worked as a mid-level administrator for some large company that did a lot of government contracting. She lived in a three-bedroom house, drove a Subaru, and saved money for retirement.

When I met this woman, let’s call her Jane, she was living in a used cargo shipping container, like one of those metal things you see on boats coming over from Asia. There was a mattress in one corner and a small table and two chairs in another. She’d rigged up some kind of latrine outside using the pieces of the container’s door. This was her home in the Palestinian village; and she was actually the envy of the village.

This village had about 100 residents, all Muslim except for her, and wasn’t large enough to have its own school. So the ten or so children had to walk three miles to the next village for school each day. Their pathway took them about 100 yards from the edge of an Israeli settlement. This particular settlement and the land of the Palestinian village was hotly contested and the residents of the settlement regularly harassed the children on their way to and from the school, making the journey dangerous, and making the children reluctant to attend school. This was the intent of the harassment: to encourage the Palestinian residents to simply leave their land and go somewhere else.

There were no police or military anywhere nearby, so Jane went to go live in this village to serve as an escort for these children to and from their school each day. Each morning she got up and walked them to school and then each afternoon she walked them back home again. She was not armed for this ministry with anything except a red hat with the letters, “CPT” on it, which stood for Christian Peacemakers Team, a video camera to document any incidents of harassment, and a bible which she read in the evenings to herself. She had been doing this about two years when we met her, and was planning to keep doing it another year, before taking a second assignment from Christian Peacemakers Team somewhere else. She was lonely, tired, occasionally scared, and angry at the politics that made her ministry necessary. And she was deeply satisfied and happy about who she was as a human being and what she was doing because of her love for God.

When we asked about her family back home Jane laughed and said, they all think I’m crazy. This made me laugh, too, and the other 15 or so American young adults who were in my group, because most of us imagined that’s probably what our families would say if we had chosen to do something like that.

And this is, of course, not unlike what people said about Jesus in the early days of his ministry. From now until the end of July, each Sunday we’re going to be reading Gospel passages from the early Chapters of Mark. These comprise what is known as the Galilean Ministry: the period of Jesus’ public life from the time he gathers his disciples until he begins his journey towards Jerusalem. The Galilean ministry is a time, first and foremost of formation for his followers. As the first disciples spend time with Jesus, they are coming to learn more about who Jesus is, how his life embodies the presence of God in the world, and what their friendship with Jesus means for them. During this part of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus begins to reveal to his followers what kinds of different choices he is inviting them to make about what matters most in their lives – so that they can excel at being agents of God’s love and compassion in the world.

And in today’s passage, his own family begins to question the choices about his life that Jesus is making and encouraging others to make, too. They’re literally saying to him, “you’re out of your mind!” just as we might say to one of our own family members embarking on a life-path that seems too unorthodox or unfamiliar.

Jesus’ choices are profoundly countercultural. I can think of at least three ways in which his choices fly in the face of conventional wisdom. For over a decade before Mark’s Gospel begins, Jesus was a carpenter in Nazareth. This was likely a good job providing him with a decent income and skills in a trade that he could use to give himself some financial security. Mark’s Gospel doesn’t show us the story about the day Jesus put down his hammer and saw, hung up his apron and said to his dad, “You know, Joe, this life just isn’t feeling right to me anymore. I gotta take off.” Mark’s Gospel doesn’t show his father’s concern that Jesus is giving up his source of income and stability. In a world where most people want to minimize their financial risk-taking, Jesus makes a choice to increase the amount of risk in his life.

Second, Jesus goes from an environment in which he is largely safe and protected, to one in which he actively seeks out conflict and puts himself in danger. From the start of his ministry, Jesus challenges the powerful religious and political authorities of his time. He intentionally picks fights with people who have almost unchecked power within his society. In a world where most people simply keep their head down and stay out of situations that don’t concern their own interests, Jesus makes a choice to stand up to unjust authorities and take on profound risks to his own personal safety.

Third, Jesus decides he is not going to care much about his reputation. Jesus’ ministry in Galilee is all about him having chosen to hang out with society’s undesirables: to befriend tax-collectors, prostitutes, people with physical disabilities, and people who were mentally ill. Jesus understood that all people have inherent dignity, and chose to live his life in a way that honored this dignity, even though it was a risky move for his reputation. And back then, reputation was not just about status, reputation was about acceptance and protection as well. In a world where most people were careful not to associate themselves with social pariahs deemed to be “impure” Jesus makes a choice to embrace those that other people reject, even at the cost of alienating himself from the community that had supported him during his childhood and adolescence.

So when his “family” which might mean his cousins, neighbors and close friends, gathered in today’s Gospel story call him crazy, they aren’t necessarily saying he’s mentally ill, they are saying that he’s making impractical, imprudent, and unwise values choices about what is most important in his life. In other words, they’re saying he’s crazy!

I think Mark tells this story here, early in his Gospel, because he knows that this is the same kind of resistance and rejection that those who might chose to become part of the church in the 1st century will face from their own families and other close friends. Even today, when “joining a church” is now a socially acceptable thing to do, really choosing to live as a friend of Jesus, allowing your life to fully embrace the kind of sacrificial love and concern for social transformation that Jesus had, is much more risky. There are still handfuls of people camping out in “occupy protests” in major US cities, whose families think they are nuts. There are folks who choose to work with convicted sex offenders helping them re-integrate into society after their prison sentences, whom others call crazy to waste their time with such people. There are people who give up stable jobs with decent incomes to spend their time organizing youth empowerment programs in Kenya or in Lawrence, because they believe that is what they need to do to honor God’s love for them. These people are not crazy. They are just faithful, and faithful people make bold moves…like Jane did.

What a bold faithful move looks like for you, might not be what it looks like for Jane, or for Jesus. The point of making bold moves in faith isn’t just to upend your life for no reason. The point is to not be afraid to take on different priorities than those that the world around you holds. The point is to consider whether the values that you think will make for “a good life” are the same as what God thinks will make for “a good life.”

These choices are not black or white. They occur on a wide spectrum of gray. Most of us are already on that spectrum somewhere – that’s why were here this morning. We are already on that journey. Perhaps for some of you, your families are already starting to think you’re a little bit crazy because of what you do for your faith! That isn’t necessarily a bad sign. And there is reason to hope that even if you can’t find support for your faith-based values within your family, you can find support for them here within the Christian community. Because when Jesus says, “whomever does the will of God is my mother and my brother,” he speaking of his disciples, the community of his friends who support each other, who love each other for their shared commitment to living a faith-based life, and whose legacy of care and support we offer to each other here in this place. For this we are thankful, by this we are comforted, and with this we can embrace the challenge to make bold moves that reflect God’s love to the world, even when others call us crazy. Amen.