

Sermon preached 7/5/15 at Lawrencefield Parish Church by the Rev. Bonnie Thurston
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Mark 6:1-6

“Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” (v.4)

Our fore-fathers and mothers in the early church found this an important saying of Jesus. It appears here in Mark, twice in Luke, in John and in some non-canonical gospels. It is similar to the modern saying, “they can’t see the forest for the trees,” meaning people are so close to something (usually a situation involving other people!) that they can’t see it clearly.

Sometimes our vision is distorted because we are too close to what is before us. This is the problem the Nazareth neighbors of Jesus had. They think they know him so well that they fail to recognize him in the way that really matters.

Jesus had been travelling around the Sea of Galilee. He had stilled a storm, exorcised a demoniac, healed a woman of a hemorrhage and raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead and journeyed the 25 or so miles to Nazareth. Mark tells us “his disciples followed him;” “followed” is the technical term for discipleship in Mark’s gospel. The purpose of this journey was not just a family visit, but to give the disciples of Jesus practice in “following,” a chance to learn discipleship by watching their Rabbi at work.

Unsurprisingly, when the Sabbath comes, Jesus goes to the synagogue to teach. In his time Nazareth was a very insignificant village. The important town was Sepphoris, where the Romans were engaged in major building projects that employed the *tektons*, the craftsmen (which our Bibles translate “carpenters”) from Nazareth. Jesus goes to his hometown, to the synagogue in which he grew up (his “home church” if you will) and begins to teach.

The people in attendance actually ask the right questions: Where did this man get this? What is this wisdom? They, like the Jewish officials from Jerusalem, want to know the source of Jesus’ authority. He’s a local boy. He has no education beyond that of their village, and yet exhibits a recognizable degree of learning and wisdom beyond them. He has, as we say in S. WV “book larnin’ AND horse sense.” They have heard of his miracles elsewhere in Galilee. News travels fast in small towns. And they want to know where his authority and power originate.

But, alas, they draw the wrong conclusions from the right questions. They know Jesus’ mother, and his siblings, and, rather than being pleased and proud of Jesus’ accomplishments, “they took offence,” literally they were *scandalized* by him; he “tripped them up.” Something about the home town boy’s teaching upset them. Jesus’ hearers must have become restive, shifted in their seats, muttered to themselves and each other. (Good preachers do experience this!) The restiveness elicited the proverb from Jesus: no prophet is popular in his native town.

So Mark tells us Jesus did no work of power there except to cure a few people. Even when misunderstood, Jesus is so compassionate that he cannot completely bypass human need.

But he was amazed at their unbelief. Those who should have known him best and responded most enthusiastically to his message didn't. They were too close. They couldn't take in his message perhaps because his vision challenged their local status quo.

How frequently do we do the same sort of thing? Hometown folks speak the God word to us, and we do not hear them because we know their families, have known them for such a long time. We think we still know them even when they've been away and returned. It's so easy to forget that people change, that there might be prophets in our midst whom we ignore because they are so familiar.

God can, and does, raise up spiritual teachers and leaders from among us, from those near us, from those we have known for donkey's years.

When we think of evangelists, of bringers of good news, I suspect we think of the Great Commission at the end of St. Matthew's gospel with its "go ye into all the world." But I submit to you the hardest commission Jesus gave was to the Gerasene demoniac: "Go home to your friends [those same friends who left him to howl naked in a cemetery], and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." (Mk 5:19) It's easier to speak with strangers of the deep things of the heart than to speak to those nearest us...as Jesus' Nazareth encounter demonstrates.

The greatest teacher God sends us may not be the TV evangelist, media spiritual guru, or Dean of a great Cathedral. He or she might be your next door neighbor, your sister, your son, ...or your spouse, especially your spouse. In the times in which we live it is especially important not to miss the spiritual wisdom offered in our midst.

Note, please, that even Jesus can't easily work without human cooperation. It wasn't that Jesus didn't have the power to work in Nazareth. It was that by their misperception, their unbelief, the hometown folks impeded what Jesus wanted to do for them. It might be that the limit of God's power is set by us. Perhaps God can't do for us what we don't believe God can do.

Elsewhere Jesus says "behold I stand at the door and knock." He doesn't say "I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down." Perhaps through the word or example of a familiar messenger, Jesus wants us to open our heart's door to him so that he can give us a vast and secure knowledge of God, a life lived abundantly and in great joy, confidence about a future held securely in God's hands. And the only thing that prevents us from receiving all this is, well, US. AMEN.

Lawrencefield Parish Church, WHL 7/5/2015