

***A sermon based preached on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021 based upon Mark 6:1-6 entitled, "The Arrogance that Blocks God's Grace"***

The hard part of reading just a small piece of the Gospel story is that you miss the full impact of what has come before it. Just before the story we're about to hear, two people are miraculously healed by Jesus – a woman who had been sick for twelve years and a little girl who has been pronounced dead is brought back to life and full health. Just before that a very self-destructive man – someone we would think of as severely mentally ill – the “Gerasene demoniac” has been delivered of his legion of demons and restored to his right mind. Before that, the crowds have witnessed Jesus empower a paralyzed man to walk, another man have his “withered hand” healed, and a man plagued by leprosy cleansed, with the implication that these were but a few of the miracles people had witnessed Jesus perform. Crowds of people have followed him around the countryside, enchanted by the stories he tells – the wisdom he teaches.

And now he comes home to Nazareth for the first time – to the couple of hundred people in the small town that was essentially his extended family. These are the people who helped raised him. These are the people who presumably know him best.

He's been away for a while; we don't know how long. But they've heard the stories of what he's been doing elsewhere. Initially, they seem ready to celebrate him. As in other towns Jesus has visited, on the Sabbath they give him the honor deserving of a Rabbi by providing him opportunity to teach in the Synagogue.

And what happens next is rather stunning. Spoiler alert: Jesus is rejected.

When we hear a Bible story, there are usually a couple of different places where we can put ourselves in the story – different characters with which to identify. In the story you are about to hear, there are basically two choices.

We can identify with Jesus and feel his pain when he gets rejected. There can be some comfort for us in this, particularly if we've known some sort of similar rejection ourselves by people who supposedly knew us best. Jesus knows our pain.

But the other option for placing ourselves in the story is with the townspeople – the people who felt they could claim to know Jesus best – the people who thought of Jesus as “their” Jesus. As hard as this may be, perhaps that's where we should try to place ourselves in the story. We are, after all, Jesus' church. He's “our” Jesus, right? Presumably we know the stories about him better than people who've never stepped foot in a church, or cracked open a New Testament.

So, as I read our passage this morning, that is where I invite us to place ourselves in the story – with the people of the small town of Nazareth.

Listen for the word of the Lord as it comes to us from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark's Gospel, beginning in the first verse.

**(Jesus) left that place**

that “place” being the home where he brought back to life the little girl

**and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!"**

So far, so good. But then something seems to shift as the people begin to reflect on just who this is they are listening to.

**Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"**

A couple of things to note: First, that Jesus had worked among them as a “carpenter.” When we hear this, we tend to picture a skilled, respected middle class craftsman, but that’s not really accurate. In those days there wasn’t really a “middle class”. The people of Nazareth would have been all relatively poor, but there were distinctions in regard to just how poor – a social hierarchy among the poor.

The “upper crust” among the poor people of Nazareth would have been poor farmers who still owned a small patch of land right outside the village. What is referred here as a “carpenter” would have been someone whose family somewhere in the past would have owned a patch of land as well, but as was the way things worked had lost their land when at some point they got too far in debt to continue. A “carpenter” was essentially a manual laborer who had found a way to scratch out a living now that his family no longer had land on which to grow crops. In other words, to identify Jesus as a “carpenter” is to label him as “lower crust.”

Second, the phrase, “son of Mary.” In those days, a man was always identified in relationship to his father. The implication here is there was something scandalous about Jesus’ birth. People aren’t quite sure who Jesus’ father was. They surely don’t know the stories the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke tell in which God is revealed to be Jesus’ father. If they had known those stories – well, they would have treated Jesus with reverence from the get go.

There can be a challenge here to how we imagine Jesus’ childhood, particularly if we think of him as having been “without sin.” Evidently, Jesus didn’t stand out among his peers. The seed of divinity within him wasn’t evident. On the outside, he seemed more or less like any other kid.

So, Jesus was from the lower end of the social hierarchy of Nazareth, and there was some scandal surrounding his birth – not that people would have typically talked about the scandal. It was just known, but rarely mentioned. That’s part of what’s good about small towns. On one level, small towns embrace their own, even if they have some sort of scandal associated with them. *“He’s flawed, but he’s ours.”*

Except... except when the person puts on airs and begins to step out of his place -- claims some higher wisdom from that of their own. Then, well, he has to be put back in his place which is what seems to be happening as the people of Nazareth bring up these details from Jesus’ life.

**And they took offense at him.**

**Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."**

**And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.**

It's pretty stunning, isn't it? "*He could do no deed of power there.*" You almost get the feeling that the Gospel writer Mark was so disturbed by the stark truth of that statement that he felt obliged to add the bit about a couple of people getting healed by Jesus while he was there in Nazareth.

I see a couple of things to take away from this:

God doesn't force Godself on us. God requires some willingness -- some humility on our parts for God's power to work in our lives.

The people of Nazareth lacked this humility. Their arrogance was in claiming they knew more than they did. In their minds, the possibility that Jesus had evolved into someone before whom they should become like a child to learn from meant surrendering a pride that in their minds was too precious to surrender.

How often do we do the same? How often do we claim to know more than we do, when in fact what we don't know always vastly outweighed what we do know. Receptivity to God's grace and wisdom begins with such acknowledging our tendency for such arrogance.

God wants to bless us, just as he sought to bless the people of Nazareth. What sorts of roadblocks might we be putting up to his grace?

Jesus comes to us disguised as people we think we know all too well -- people we think of as "our people" -- people we can look at with condescension because our over familiarity shuts our minds and hearts to the ways they may be bearers of grace and truth for us.

Who might God be trying to speak to us through to whom our go-to response is condescension?

When Jesus died on the cross, the common thinking of the age was that such a death marked him as a total loser -- as the last person God would be trying to communicate to the world through.

This morning in the sacrament of Holy Communion we contemplate the mystery that in Jesus' willingness to lay down his life for all of us God revealed Godself most clearly.

Can we humble our hearts and minds to this great mystery?