

“Nitty-Gritty” – Mark 6:1-13 – July 9/06

Hometowns have some funny characteristics, don't they? I think every hometown has some unique habits, customs, foods, practices that are peculiar to that place. Local sayings, peculiarities of speech are another of those things that are peculiar to hometowns. Some are more obvious than others, for example the Irish accent and odd sayings that identify someone from St. John's in Newfoundland (or the other dialects that to a trained ear can identify the specific town or even cove from which the speaker comes!)

One of the peculiar sayings in Northern Ontario that drove my father crazy was the expression, “went and did”, as in, “do you know what I went and did?” There were lots of other similar abuses of the English language against which he grumbled and railed, but that was one of his favourites, and verse 12 in our reading from Mark's gospel is so close to that saying that it made me chuckle when I read it – “so they went out and proclaimed” – not far from, “they went out and did”, is it?

Another characteristic of hometowns that strikes home in this reading is the whole issue of not having any or much respect for hometown people we know who have achieved much in life. Even when they rise to superstar status, we tend to claim, “oh, I knew her when she ...”, or, “I remember him as a kid in school”, and diminish their accomplishments with our memories of them when they were just like us.

Even Jesus was not immune from this kind of treatment, was he? We hear in this text how Jesus returned to his hometown, a featured guest preacher in the synagogue there, teaching with great authority and astounding all who heard him. Unfortunately the crowd were astounded not so much by what he had to say, impressive and authoritative as it seems to have been, but astounded instead because this was their own Jesus – local kid. They knew his family well, his mother and brothers by name and his sisters who were right there in the crowd.

I can't help wondering what kind of a kid Jesus was, especially as the text tells us, “they took offence at him.” Sounds a bit to me like there was some hidden anger buried there – could Jesus have seemed to them a snotty know-it-all nerdy kind of kid, the one with all the right answers in school, perfect at street games, the ultimate scholar and athlete combined? Kids like that are the object of a lot of resentment, and that resentment boils quickly to the surface if the person returns to the hometown after great accomplishments in life.

That kind of disbelief, of wanting to diminish the accomplishments of a hometown person is very common. Even Jesus, amazed as he was at their unbelief, recognized how ‘normal’ it was for this to happen, and commented that “prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” (Sounds a little like even his brothers and sisters joined in asking, “who does he think he is?!”)

Worse yet, there is one hometown person to whom, or perhaps more accurately against whom, we display that same kind of dismissal of achievement – and that hometown person, sadly, is ourselves. Oh, the disbelief that this person we think we knew so well in school, at home, on the playground could ever accomplish mighty deeds may not be expressed quite so openly, or with such offense and passion, but my experience is that just about every person can't believe that this awkward, bumbling, ineffectual hometown person known as them could ever have amounted to much, and so it must all be a sham. We're amazed that strangers seem to think we are accomplished and sage individuals, and we often live in fear that if they only knew who we really are, if they could only find out our childhood inadequacies, they would no longer treat us with such respect. If they only knew the true nitty-gritty of our hometown lives they would take offence at us as well.

And this, to me, is the connection between these two seemingly disjointed parts of the story in our text. Jesus knew the disciples, and their capabilities, and their backgrounds, and the nitty-gritty of

their lives, and he still trusted them to go forth and change the world. He called them and began to send them out in twos – an excellent strategy, each providing strength, support and encouragement for the other especially in those times when things would not go right. Jesus knew that it would from time-to-time not go right, and gave his disciples detailed instructions on how to handle those problematic times.

When I think about that reluctance to honour hometown people who have made big accomplishments, and how we are reluctant to honour our own accomplishments, I see a connection with how we so often react to the incidents in this gospel story. I think we move very quickly to condemn the people of Jesus' hometown ("how could they have been so blind?"), and we also move quickly to focus on the negative part of Jesus' instructions to his disciples. Most of us recall this passage when we hear (and/or use) the expression, "kick the dust off your feet", and focus on the doomed fate of those malcreants who refused to hear the disciples.

Would that we could set aside that 'nitty-gritty' piece of useful advice from Jesus to his disciples, and focus instead upon both the broader vote of confidence he had in them to go forth and proclaim the kingdom with mighty acts of healing, and the success they had in doing so. "Rely upon yourselves (and the power I have given you)", Jesus told them – telling them they needed nothing else, no props, no advance team, no road crew to set up sound stages, no tour bus or corporate jet. "Dress simply", he told them, "and be yourselves."

And with apologies to my father, and more-or-less quoting scripture, they "went and did" just that. The disciples went out, proclaimed the message to all, cast out many demons and cured many who were sick. What a success story! This is a story about success, and discipleship, and faith and believing and response, not a story about failure. We move so quickly to dismiss the people of Jesus' hometown, we move so quickly to disparage those who did not respond, we move so quickly to diminish our own worth, our own accomplishments, our own capabilities in the kingdom of God.

"I could never do that!" – how many times have you heard that, especially in connection with the word 'evangelise'. How many times have you said it, "I could never do that!", revealing your distrust of that hometown person 'you'.

Our gospel story is a story of "can do", especially in the right context, and a message to us, to you and me, to find the right context for us to proclaim the good news of God's mercy and grace in Christ Jesus. We don't have to be superstars, we don't have to have flashy tools and techniques, and we aren't expected to have success in all places at all times. Even Jesus, as Mark reminds us, "could do no deed of power there, with a few exceptions." Instead of being called to more than we are able, we are called, like those disciples, to go forth and where people are prepared to listen to what we have to say, and more importantly to see how we live in the joy and peace of Christ's love, we are asked to simply proclaim God's loving action in and through the nitty-gritty of our own lives.

So, hometown boys and girls, go a little easy on those from your hometown who have 'made it'. Go especially easy on that one person from your hometown who you never expected to make it, and of whom you still can't believe (every day) that they are 'making it' – yourself. Know that Jesus has every confidence in you – he knows your every weakness and failing, but he also knows your strengths, your gifts and talents, and he calls you forth and sends you out to proclaim with all you are his love for you and for all people.