

“That Upstart Jesus” – Mark 6:1-13 – July 5/09

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 – and some peculiar people as well! Local sayings and odd idioms of speech are other things that are peculiar to hometowns. Some are more obvious than others, for example the Irish accent and quaint sayings that identify someone from St. John's in Newfoundland, or the other dialects that to a trained ear 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 pet peeves. I was reminded of all his grumbling in verse 12 of our reading from Mark's gospel. It is so close to that saying that it made me chuckle when I read it – “so they went out and proclaimed” – that's not very different 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 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. It is said, for example, that it is almost impossible to find a man in Timmins who doesn't claim to have “dated” Shania Twain!

Even that upstart 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. In spite of his status elsewhere here he was a hometown boy. They knew his family well, his mother and brothers by name and his sisters who were right there in the crowd. It sounds a bit to me like there was some hidden anger buried there, which is also not surprising. There often is a feeling of resentment towards people who have “made it” on the outside, a bitterness that they have gone on while those still in the hometown have stayed frozen in time.

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?!”) Mark even records the footnote that Jesus could do no deed of power there except for curing a few sick people. This is a very curious statement, and we'll look at it a bit deeper in a minute.

For the moment, however, given the lack of response in his hometown we can perhaps understand why Jesus' next instructions to the disciples seem so harsh. “If they won't listen to you, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” Wow! There's that Middle East disgracing with feet again – shades of shoes thrown at dignitaries and images of people beating statues with their sandals. This is not just a “testimony against”, this is an action of public contempt. But for all of the negative emphasis carried in that admonition, Mark also adds a footnote proclaiming great success, as “they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”

So, to summarize: Jesus is dishonoured in his hometown and is almost powerless; the disciples are advised to avoid places of negativity and carry out their mission with great power and success. Now that we can step back from the details of dust from feet and the discomfort of a harsh warning from Jesus, I think it gets a little easier to grasp what he was trying to say.

I've mentioned before that I'm reading a fascinating book called ‘Positivity’ by Barbara Fredrickson. This is not your average “don't worry, be happy” kind of self-help book, but rather a rather

successful attempt at making available to the general public by a distinguished scholar and researcher the psychological and physical benefits of recognizing the positive things that occur in your life. Her research is extensive and well-supported by other noted scholars and indicates that if the ratio over time of your positive happenings is three times that of your negative happenings, then not only will you have a better outlook on life but you will even have as many as ten additional years to enjoy life.

As I read her work and articles by other scholars that supports this view of positivity I am struck by the parallels between positivity and faith. Much of what Fredrickson says about the benefits of recognizing positive occurrences in life I believe also holds for recognizing God's blessings in your life and considering the ratio of those blessed times over the times when it seems that God is somehow missing or silent. I don't have either the credentials or the research to back up this claim, but the parallel between Fredrickson's positive/negative ratio and the ratio of faith/doubt seems pretty clear to me.

And so when I read the part in her book about how either force – positivity or negativity – is fostered or allowed to grow then there is a spiral effect. Whether 'up' through positive reinforcement or 'down' through negative reinforcement, a consistent attitude results in an ever-widening spiral that reaches out and draws in others of like mind – or worse yet, draws in those with a neutral outlook and converts them to the mindset of the spiral. Can you see where my thoughts went with this? Such a spiral, ever-increasing through inducting others, sooner or later develops a community with a mindset that is either positive or negative. I'm sure you've witnessed this phenomenon, and probably have been involved either as a spiral generator or as an inductee. It is important to note that this works for both negative and positive spirals. It is also very important to note that being aware of this phenomenon makes it not only possible but easier to choose to break out of a negative spiral and to opt in to a positive spiral.

And here's where the parallel between positive/negative and faith/doubt spirals becomes relevant, as we hear Jesus tell his newly-commissioned disciples to choose to opt out of being dragged into communities characterized or paralyzed by a spiral of doubt. "If they refuse to hear you ... leave ... and as you leave, shake off the dust from your feet ..." That's a pretty clear instruction about how to deal with a community of negativity. Yes, some will argue about the importance of persistence, and how it's especially important to persist in trying to win over those who don't want to even listen. But there's also the argument that the word needs to be spread, and the most fertile place to spread that word is in communities who are willing to listen, open to hear, and likely to embrace this message of faith.

The evidence offered to us in this piece of scripture also seems pretty clear that the strategy of Jesus and his instruction to the new disciples was appropriate. It also seems pretty clear by implication that there were many such positive, open-to-faith communities ready to hear and incorporate the good news of reconciliation with God through Christ. By marked contrast with the apparent powerlessness of Jesus in his own home town, the disciples had resounding success, casting out many demons and curing many who were sick. Even more convincing is the evidence of how the spiral of faith grew and expanded to include Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.

How about for us today? Can you imagine what the effect would be if each and every one of us in this community of faith were to cross over the "tipping points" of positivity and faith? Even if every one of us were to shift slightly from the negativity/doubt end of the scale towards the positivity/faith pole, can you sense how the whole tone or flavour of the congregation would change also? Please, don't misunderstand me – I am NOT complaining that you are all a bunch of negative, unfaithful people!! For the most part we are already well on the way to positivity and faithful living. But there's always room for growth and improvement, isn't there? And if we were all to shift just a smidgen up the scale, perhaps the whole teeter-totter would tip over, and what a difference there might be in how we proclaim God's good news in Christ to our community. The spiral might just spring out a bit wider, helping to graft others who are ready to listen and respond into this community of faith. How exciting would that be? Can you imagine? It's a very exciting prospect, all triggered by that upstart Jesus, 'dissed' in his own home town.