

“Too-Familiar Jesus” – Mark 6:1-13 – July 8/12

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!

My hometown is Sudbury, a nickel-mining centre in Northern Ontario, and there were lots of local expressions there. One that drove my father crazy was the expression, “went and did”, as in, “do you know what I went and did?” I was reminded of all his grumbling as I read “so they went out and proclaimed” in verse 12 of our reading from Mark's gospel. It is so close to “they went and did” that it made me chuckle when I read 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.” Seems 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, perhaps we can hear and understand this story of contrasts – of unbelief and lack of accomplishment set against faith and possibilities.

This brings us back to that curious statement in the first half of the story, that Jesus could do no deed of power there except for curing a few sick people. It is a curious statement for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the disturbing theological question it poses about whether or not Jesus had ultimate power. More angels than can be counted have danced on the head of this particular pin as theologians and others of faith have wrestled with the implications of Jesus seeming to be powerless. Mark's choice of language set the whole argument in motion, as he clearly states Jesus was unable to do any powerful deeds; if he had expressed the outcome another way it might have helped, although those other ways raise similar issues. For example, if Mark had written, "Jesus chose not to do any powerful deeds there ..." we would wonder about his motives. Or if Mark had simply written, "Jesus did not do any powerful deeds there ..." we would also wonder why not.

So it seems Mark wanted us to be clear that there was a reason why no powerful deeds got done, and in the context, and given the immediately-following warning about "shaking the dust off" re people who wouldn't receive the good news, it is pretty clear that the reason for no powerful deeds was because the people around Jesus chose to see him as just one of them, that he was "too ordinary" to be able to do anything exceptional or incredible. Yes, we know, we are certain, especially because of his resurrection, that Jesus could have rammed good deeds and powerful works down their throats, but that in itself would have betrayed the message of hope and reconciliation that he brought to those who would believe. Faith, belief, a willingness to respond and a desire to rely upon Jesus were and still are necessary to receive the benefits and blessings of his extra-ordinary power. Not that the opposites – lack of faith or unbelief – rob Jesus of any power, but rather that they rob the unbeliever of the opportunity to receive those blessings. The gift is offered, but if the gift is either ignored or rejected, the giver of the gift is not affected, only the would-be-recipient loses out.

This understanding raises the question of whether the church, or indeed Christianity as a whole, has moved into the dangerous realm of seeing Jesus as too familiar, as too ordinary? Oh, all the right words are used, the right hymns are sung, our familiar prayers are prayed, our rites and rituals are undisturbed. But has the church, have we, become so accustomed to Jesus that we can no longer, like his hometown people, his kin, his household, see him as extra-ordinary? We talk about how Jesus, in concert with God and the Holy Spirit, can do miraculous things in our lives, but do we really believe that, do we really accept that, do we really allow him to do those miraculous and powerful deeds?

Perhaps part of our impediment to allowing Jesus to do wondrous deeds within us is a related or similar issue ... that we consider ourselves to be "too ordinary" ... unable to see how precious we – you and me – are in God's sight. We see ourselves as too ordinary, that there is no way God meant us in that famous "God so loved the world" expression, failing to understand that it was precisely to the "too ordinary" people of this world – the weak, the broken, the failing, the downhearted, the incapable – the "too ordinary" people of this world that God reached out through the "too ordinary" yet indescribably extra-ordinary Jesus of Nazareth to bring them healing, and hope, and uplifting, and wholeness, and capability, and love.

Jesus knew there would be those who would not listen, who would refuse to hear, who would turn away, who would turn down the offers from God for healing and wholeness, and he cautioned his disciples not to waste their time and efforts trying to coerce or cajole them into believing and accepting, but instead to move on to carry the message to those who would listen.

You might 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.

Mark's message also seems pretty clear that the strategy of Jesus and his instruction to the new disciples was appropriate, as he declares the successfulness of their mission in terms of many demons being cast out and many people healed. By implication it also seems pretty clear 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. And it didn't stop there, as spiral of faithful and accepting communities grew and expanded to include Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.

Not that we are a community who rejects Jesus, or one who won't listen to his message, but perhaps we are just a wee bit guilty, like his hometown people, of seeing Jesus as far too ordinary to do anything exceptional in all-too-ordinary us. If so, perhaps we can hear Mark's prodding here to see Jesus as being completely exceptional, bringing a powerfully healing and restoring message of hope and love to people whom God considers exceptional and wonderful – to us, and to those around us, to our friends, our neighbours, ourselves.