

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER THE PENTECOST

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Saying No to Jesus at Nazareth

It could have been quite the stumbling block for Jesus' future ministry. Going to his home town of Nazareth was not exactly what you would call a ticker tape parade reception. Was that ok with Jesus that that happened? Or perhaps you have heard the saying, "Oh, I'm sure it's just fine with Jesus."

However, the real answer is, "No. No, it's not just fine with Jesus."

Let the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There are so many instances in the gospels when Jesus is portrayed as the master stoic, classically unperturbed, the perfection of what is now called "ministry of presence." But then there are the stories where Jesus breaks out of this mentor and mountaintop-sitting-guru image with an exhibition of his pain, grief, disappointment, amazement, sarcasm, satire, frustration, pastoral non-calm, and more. What shall we do with those moments of Jesus' expression? Compartmentalize them as "well, you know, he was human"? And we stand conflicted between the stoic, and the "so what" human. What can we learn otherwise?

Today's story from the gospel of Mark, of Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth, the place where he grew up after being born in Bethlehem, you know; and the place to which his family went following the Egyptian sojourn of survival from Herod, and the place he lived until, after his baptism at the hands of John, he moved to Capernaum, this story is one of those stories of dramatic expression.

On another level in this story, or for another reason, we are also faced with something that usually challenges us in our bible study, whether on our own or in groups. It's a subject we would really rather not consider, and that would be the faith of Jesus to accomplish healings,.... or not!. I'm referring to the manner in which we hear the words at the end of the Gospel reading today.

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

What exactly is the gospeler telling us there?

Well, left to our ears that so often hear too easily the negative, the weakness, the flaws of others, that it says Jesus - the Son of God - could do no deed of power.

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What?!

And, you see, if suddenly we are challenged to consider THAT, we just have to include the REST of his ministry to us as it is related to us from the scriptures. So then, by stream of anxiousness, comes that fearful contemplation of whether there is enough Jesus to bring ME to SALVATION. And THAT can lead me potentially to say, quite idolatrously, "I am so bad that Jesus himself cannot save me. I am doomed." You may have heard yourself say that to yourself, or someone else to themselves.

I think that is a gross mis-application of the issue at hand in Nazareth, much less our understanding of God's Mercy.. and hopefully if you have ever heard someone say that you know how untrue it just sounds and you say something healthily Christian in response.

There's more though; the story does stand in the way of a different mis-application, the one that I started with that is so prevalent today. And, again, as we come to this story in a bible study, for instance, a group of believers intent on grasping God's Word can become embroiled in an anxious discussion of quite another self-centered impression, as was our first misapplication. In this case, that God's Love is a Grace "so amazing" that nothing I do or say, nothing I exclude or overlook in my living will cause God to turn away from me in eternal life. After all, doesn't the scripture say that nothing can separate me from the love of God?!

A careful study, allowing for Jesus to not be created into what WE think he should be or act like, or what kind of rose garden we demand for ourselves, should help bible study groups come to a correct understanding, even if the study-ers depart unsettled.

Let's take a quick look at today's gospel reading here. Use your bulletin where the gospel is printed for your convenience and follow along. Make your own notes about Jesus, his responses, the people, and their responses.

So here we are with the beginning of Mark chapter 6.

"Jesus left that place" – That place is the scene of the raising of Jairus' daughter, from Mark chapter 5, which we read in church last Sunday.

"...and came to his hometown," his hometown meaning Nazareth. But as we know from 4 chapters earlier in Mark, Jesus had already moved his base of operations to Capernaum, where it says, "he made his home in Capernaum". So, this is a visit to where he grew up, spending 30 years of his life.

"and his disciples followed him." - the scriptures sometimes use the phrase "his disciples" to refer to the 12; and sometimes to a much larger group, such as the 72 he sent out two by two, and even larger, like 120, but meaning those who had made a decision to follow and serve and learn. This is different from "the crowds", those who were curiosity seekers, or didn't know what to think but wanted their physical problems healed or as with Jairus his daughter kept from dying.

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“On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue,” -- going to the synagogue on the sabbath was part of the strategy of proclaiming his mission; Paul and Peter and many others followed the same strategy. But this would not be a normal synagogue visit- these people knew Jesus, and he knew them. There is deep familiarity here on this sabbath. These are the people he grew up with, many probably he looked up to as a child and teen, and they knew him as a quiet unassuming young man. But not now...

“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?” -- In their familiarity they are blown away – astounded!! – by Jesus’ teaching. And they are recognizing that this wisdom had been “given to him”, that is, that it was Godly. But since they hadn’t heard Jesus in their synagogue since his baptism, then against what could they measure it? And they are astounded.

The next word betrays, though, that they were not oblivious to Jesus. It says they said, “What deeds of power are being done by his hands!” -- You don’t say that in that way unless you’ve known or seen or heard about already. In fact, since Jesus had already been moving about the villages of Galilee I have no doubt some of them that morning had already watched as he healed and cast out demons, or had even become the beneficiaries of power. But still the reaction and emotion is of astoundment, of excitement, even of elation is in the house! So far, so good.

Then comes another statement, one that is not at all certain in meaning. They said, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and we know his brothers, and are not his sisters here with us?” You would think with all the astoundment, they would say from here, “Who knew?! How wonderful. This guy is with us today! Let’s keep him here for a while! Jesus, Teach us more! Let us benefit from God’s power through you! Hallelujah!”

But that’s not the way it went. It says, “And they took offense at him.” They said no to Jesus. Why? Perhaps envy. Perhaps local boy done good, and they didn’t. Perhaps it’s the old statement, that familiarity breeds contempt. But they rejected him.

Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor,except in their hometown.” Jesus is dripping sadness, amazement, even sarcasm, and proclaims the irony.

“And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” -- SOMEbody wanted his help; SOMEbody put their trust in him, perhaps only from desperation. But not the rest. No power from taking offense.

“And he was amazed at their unbelief.” And here is Jesus’ breakout emotion. Amazement is both emotion and rational response, and can be either positive or negative. And he shows it. No, it was not just all right with Jesus that they took offense. And then dramatically shows it by the last phrase in the story,

“Then he went about among the villages teaching.” In other words, He left them. He moved on.

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Here's a summary:

- ❖ Jesus came to them, on mission.
- ❖ Rightly so, they were “astounded” by his teaching, and the deeds of power.
- ❖ Despite those things, they did a “180” and “took offense at him.”
- ❖ Nonetheless, He wanted to do deeds of power there, but couldn't, and only healed a few people.
- ❖ Jesus, in perfection, lays the blame at their unbelief.
- ❖ Jesus leaves them. and moves on with his mission.

Ouch.

One mis-application is answered even before this story takes place, and that is found in the consideration of the folks there in Nazareth. They already knew, and were astounded, that the power of Jesus was victorious over whatever situations and obstacles they had decided were impossible to overcome. Deafness, inability to talk, paralysis, death, even lack of self-worth, or considering yourself beyond Jesus' abilities. As well, the story answers the bible study question of whether it was JESUS who didn't have the power or faith to overcome humanity's problems and sinfulness. And his feeling is shared with the word “amazed”: it was their unbelief. As we set down those mis-applications, we are assured and confident in this: So we still have a savior, not a lesser savior because he took on humanity onto himself. And friends, the events of this story at Nazareth-- it was not ok with Jesus.

The main point here is the challenge to us that, “No, it's NOT just fine with Jesus” about my belief, or unbelief, my levels of respect or disrespect of god, my living my life in presumption of God's salvation for me (that's me at the unexamined center of my own life, or turning humbly to Jesus to be the center and life and healing of my identity and being). And the end of the story is the danger that is involved by such unexamined presumption – Jesus leaves them (apply this to yourself as Jesus leaves YOU after coming to you directly) and moves on to others who will receive him, and believe in him.

What is our problem THESE days? Why do we so often go about our business as if as the Dooby Brothers sang, “Jesus is just alright with me, oh yeah”of course they wrote it having just smoked a load of weed ---perhaps that's a clue. We do not or have not been taught to see God clearly in all his wisdom and power. And if that is the case, then there is no difference between back then and now. The People of Israel – and I say this in general, since there certainly were a lot of Jews who chose to follow Jesus while he was here on earth -- in general, the People of Israel had lost track of the God of all Power. That Awesome God, who reigns from heaven above, who was now RIGHT in FRONT of THEM.

When I was studying at University, I was also not behaving in a way that complemented the faith that I professed. That was a very gentle way of saying I was being disobedient to God in

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relationships. I could say that Jesus was Lord but was unwilling through the blindness of my own desires and actions to actually allow Him to be the one I truly followed.

You know, when Jesus was on this earth his ministry was actually geographically and otherwise limited by his decision to take on human flesh. So, when he walked away from Nazareth, it looked like the end or complete rejection of them. Fortunately, the people of Nazareth could go to the next town if their curiosity continued, or if conviction moved them to do so. I have no doubt. Now, of course, Jesus can continue to come to us through the work of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost and repeated. We thus have a second chance, knowing that it wasn't ok with Jesus.

I was at university, like I was sharing, walking down the sidewalk toward class, on a lovely western Oregon day, much like this San Diego morning, and I heard the Lord say to me, "You need to choose. You need to stop your behavior, and follow me." It was very clear. I remember saying, "No. I don't want to give it up." Somehow deep inside, I did the same as those in the synagogue. I took offense. I actually felt at that moment that Jesus left me. Theologically I can say that didn't happen. But I felt the loss of presence. I immediately felt very empty and alone.

It took me quite some time to come back, to reinvoke Jesus, to put my life in order. And at that moment I found Jesus waiting for me. Further reflection told me that he had Even been coming to me before that moment in order to help bring me along. And I am eternally grateful. Hard to talk about even now, well more than 40 years later.

My problem? The same as all, always, to place my sensibilities and awareness and realities before the actual reality of Jesus and his desire to meet us RIGHT THERE. Me first, him maybe second. Tragically, nothing new under the sun.

But Here, my friends, is our good news, that Jesus, whether on earth or in heaven, continues to be available to us. And calls us to receive him.

Don't be like Nazareth. Receive him fully. Trust him beyond yourself. Let him heal you. Let him be the center of your life and being.

And thank God Jesus did not allow the offenses of others, or lack of faith for reception of his power, or the few healings, to be such a personal stumbling block as to stop him in his mission to us as the Messiah, the Son of God, our Savior.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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