

Sermon for Proper 9, Year B

The Text: Mark 6:1-13

A young couple had been married for just a few months when they engaged in various conflicts. Neither said aloud what they were thinking – that their marriage was a big mistake. One day she burst into tears calling her husband ‘heartless’ and a ‘cheapskate’. He shouted that he’d rather be a cheapskate than a nag. Then he grasped the car keys on his way out. His parting words were, “That’s it! I’m leaving you!”

But before he could put the car into gear, the passenger door flew open, and his wife sat on the seat beside him. “And just where do you think you’re going?” he asked. She replied, giving an answer that would decide the direction of their lives for the next 43 years: “If you’re leaving me, I’m going with you.”

This story of conflict had a happy ending. As often is the case, conflict resolved can result in a closer and stronger relationship between people. In today’s Gospel we see conflict happening between the most unlikely of people, the folk of Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth. Jesus was no doubt looking forward to being there and receiving the same warm reception he’d received elsewhere. The folk Jesus had grown up with thought they knew Jesus really well as the son Mary and Joseph the carpenter. As a carpenter Jesus would have had the skills to make doors, furniture, and oxen yokes. While a carpenter’s work was much appreciated, they weren’t given the respect given to religious leaders like rabbis. The townspeople were also familiar with Jesus’ brothers and sisters.

Now when they hear Jesus speaking so profoundly in their own synagogue, they wonder what this local ‘lad’ is up to. How can this man they’ve known since he was a toddler have such understanding and wisdom about the things of God? He never studied under any rabbi; he’s a carpenter. If he were the Messiah, he would be of noble origins and in glorious attire. Jesus didn’t match with their preconceived ideas of what the Messiah would look like. So, where Jesus least expects it, he experiences sarcasm, rejection, and conflict. He knows firsthand what it’s like when we too experience conflict with those close to us and feel wounded by the sarcasm of our opponents.

Jesus responds to their rejection and dismissal of him: “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour.” Jesus didn’t demand to be honoured by his hometown residents. Rather, he was seeking to sow the seeds of faith for the future. Nevertheless, he was amazed at their lack of faith. They were too locked into their pet views about religion to want to learn new truths and insights from Jesus.

The greatest hindrance to a deeper appreciation of what Jesus means for us today is a feeling of familiarity with his life and teaching. When it has been suggested to men and women, who see themselves as “reasonably good Christians” that they could benefit from a deeper examination of what the New Testament says about Jesus, they give the impression that they know all they need to know about our Saviour already. Those who, on the other hand, regularly study the Scriptures, will tell you with never-ending excitement of the new discoveries they’ve found about Jesus that deepen their devotion to him and increase their eagerness to put his teaching into practice throughout the week.

Our Lord’s unique contribution to us growing in moral integrity is *himself*. Jesus himself moves us to put into practice what he teaches us. He inspires a love that continually delights to show his love to others. Jesus’ words of love are life-giving and liberating. He says to us, “If you make my words your home you will know the truth and the truth will set you free (John 8:31).” Jesus himself is the centre of his message of good news to us.

After being rejected in Nazareth, Jesus didn’t let that painful result hinder his ongoing mission work in any way but went on to teach in other villages where he was warmly received. Many of our great leaders have had great difficulty dealing with ordinary people. Not so with Jesus. Our Lord found the workday environment of ordinary folk immensely attractive. He is unsurpassed in his ability to identify with ordinary people, as we can see from his parables. His parables are full of the details of daily life, but with a twist. Jesus reversed existing values: the last is now first, those who are the humblest are often the wisest, and the lowliest servant is the greatest citizen in Christ’s Kingdom, while a despised Samaritan is held up as an example of how we’re to treat a needy neighbour.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus stopped to listen to and help needy individuals. He is deeply affected by those who need his unique help, and praises faith wherever he sees it in action. It is faith in him, above all, that Jesus seeks from us. Where faith is alive and active, marvellous things can occur. Faith opens the door to unmerited, unearned blessings to us from our Lord. To say to Jesus, "I believe, help my lack of faith (Mark 9:24)" is to ask him to do more for us than we can believe. It's a request Jesus loves to respond to. Our Lord delights in drawing close to those for whom faith is a struggle.

We don't need to understand everything Jesus said and did in order to keep following him. He calls us simply to believe and trust him. We often find Jesus is closer to us when we're depressed rather than when everything's going well. May we come to him as soon as we can when life is a burden as he invites us to: "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28)." All those who came to Christ in desperate need received from him more, much more than they expected. God grant that you will experience this too so that you can act as Jesus' ambassadors as did his twelve apostles.

Jesus didn't let his disappointment in Nazareth hinder his work. Instead, he extended his work by means of his twelve apostles, sending them out two by two, giving them authority over evil spirits to cast them out in his name and to preach his message wherever they're warmly welcomed. Their casting out of evil spirits authenticates the message they preach. Before this, Jesus had spent time with them preparing them for this specific ministry, and they would continue to learn so much more by putting all they'd previously been taught into practice. Jesus sends them out in the full confidence that their work will be effective. To encourage them, Jesus says to them, "Those who listen to you are hearing me (Luke 10:16)."

Jesus says the same to us today. We are his ambassadors and advocates. The Gospel he's given to us is too good to keep to ourselves. He is delighted, thrilled, when we take risks for him. We're not to remain within the safe confines of our church building, but rather to put into practice out in the world, from Monday to Saturday, what we learn here in his house on Sunday. Jesus' family, who initially rejected him in Nazareth, would come to believe in him after Easter. With our witness, we too sow seeds of faith for a harvest to be reaped in God's good time in the future.

Whatever we do in Jesus' name is an extension of his work in our world. Remember, whatever you do for our Lord is never in vain but will bear fruit for eternity. Henry Benjamin Whipple once said:

“All we want in Christ; we shall find in Christ.

If we want little, we shall find little.

If we want much, we shall find much.

But if, in utter helplessness, we cast our all on Christ, he will be to us the whole treasury of God.”

May you enjoy learning more and more about Jesus as long as you live and take great joy in putting what you learn into practice, for it is Jesus who is at work in you, and through you. Amen.