

The Gospels are full of incredible miracle stories—how Jesus fed the multitudes... how he cast out demons... how he calmed the stormy sea... how he healed the sick and even raised the dead (like our story last week).

These acts of power got peoples' attention. They made people take notice.

They made people take Jesus seriously – even if they couldn't quite figure out *who* he was... or *how* they should respond to him... his miracles marked him as one who had real power... real authority... from God.

Except here... in the 6th chapter of Mark... when Jesus returned home to Nazareth and ran into a wall of opposition / of un-belief. He couldn't do any deeds of power there, Mark tells us... except a few simple cures.

Jesus had been doing so well before he returned to his hometown.

- He had been preaching and teaching all over Galilee—to large audiences.
- He had performed miracles on both shores—and in the middle—of the Sea of Galilee.
- And along the way, he had recruited a group of followers who were ready to learn from him / work with him / follow him where he went.

Yes, Jesus' ministry was off to a good start. And he was probably looking forward to sharing his “success” with the people who had helped raise him—not just his mother and brothers and sisters... but also his neighbors and boyhood friends.

They invited him to speak at synagogue on the sabbath. They wanted to hear what he had to say... what he had learned while he was away. Unlike Luke, Mark doesn't tell us what, exactly, Jesus had to say to them that day... but whatever it was “astounded them”... but it must have struck a nerve, too.

At first, they were captivated—Jesus “the simple carpenter” who had made their tables and benches... now in the role of a wise prophet of God... “*Where did this man get all this? they asked each other. “What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!”*

But then familiarity hit home... and quickly turned to contempt. “*What a minute! Isn't this the son of Mary? ...the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? ...are not his sisters here with us?”* (Who knew Jesus had so many brothers... and sisters?! ☺)

This wasn't a hypothetical question. They *knew*, good and well, *who* Jesus was... *whose* son he was. This was a slur... an insult on his character. By calling him “Mary's son” (not “Joseph's son”) – they were casting doubt on his parentage... insinuating that he didn't have a father / that he was illegitimate...

What prompted such a negative response from his hometown crowd?

What is it about familiarity that breeds contempt, as the saying goes? Because *that* was the problem. He was *familiar* to them. *They knew* (or *thought they knew*) who he was... who he was supposed to be...

Jesus was NOT what they expected... or wanted... and so they turned away...

- How would we have reacted, had we been in the position of the characters in this story?

What would we think of a neighbor / childhood friend whom we knew to be an “ordinary” hardworking man... turning into a miracle worker / teacher / preacher / prophet... let alone the reputed Son of God?

My guess is, we would all be a bit skeptical (at the least). Like them, we tend to see what we expect to see. And we're pretty slow to accept anyone or anything that challenges our preconceived ideas / assumptions.

The townspeople of Nazareth expected to see Jesus as they had always known him... no different from them. So when he preached / taught with wisdom and authority... told them about his deeds of power... they couldn't see beyond their own limited view of him.

That was the problem. Jesus was *familiar* to them. They knew him as one of their own.

Who did he think he was—casting out demons... and healing people... and speaking God's Word as if it was his own?!

They took offense at him. Rather than revise their assumptions / expectations... open themselves up to him / his teaching / power... they dismissed him...

His own people rejected him. They closed their ears (and their hearts)—to what he had to share with them. And because of their unbelief, Mark tells us, Jesus was rendered “powerless”—although his powerlessness was not about him... but about them... about their unwillingness to believe...

And Jesus got the message, loud and clear: “*Prophets are not without honor... except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.*”

The prophets of the Bible knew very well what rejection was. The people they were sent to often rejected their message (as well as the prophet, himself). The message they were sent to speak was from God—more often than not, it was to call God's people to account... to confront them of their wrongs... to call them to repentance. So, if the people didn't want to hear God's message—(who wants to be confronted / called to account / told you're going in the wrong direction?!)—well, their only recourse was to silence the one proclaiming it.

The prophet Ezekiel (from our OT reading) is a good example. The “fate” Ezekiel faced was no surprise to him. He was warned of it at the time of his call to ministry: “*Hard of face and obstinate of heart are they to whom I am sending you,*” God had said. But Ezekiel was assured of the Spirit's power working through him: “*Whether they heed or resist—for they are a rebellious house—they shall know that a prophet has been among them.*”

I guess the people of Nazareth—to whom Jesus spoke—were no better than the ancient Israelites. In fact, they might have been worse. They rejected Jesus because he was “one of their own”—someone they had watched grow up... and they couldn't / wouldn't see him for *who he was*...

Jesus could have rejected them right back... but that's not what he did.

He was “*amazed at their unbelief*”—and probably greatly saddened, too; but he didn't let them stop him. He left them, Mark tells us... and “*went out among the villages teaching.*”

And not only that, he decided to expand the mission—to include others! He commissioned and sent out his disciples, two by two... giving them authority to do the same things he did: to carry out the mission of healing and delivering people from their demons... to call people to repentance... to proclaim the kingdom and rule of God...

He didn't send them out with any program or script... he kept it simple... personal...

He sent them out without money / supplies... He sent them out to the local villages / homes... to be dependent on how people received them / to be dependent on their hospitality / grace... to build relationships / to share themselves...

“And if people don’t welcome you / if they refuse to listen to you—shake it off,” he said... “*shake off the dust that is on your feet*”... and move on...

So... where do you find yourself in this story? ...this story about “those people” who couldn’t / wouldn’t see Jesus for who he really was... this story about “those foolish Nazarenes” who closed themselves off from Jesus—his message... his power to bring healing / transformation / new life...

It can be easy for us to judge them as we read / hear this story. But what if they are us? What if we are no different from them?

Sadly, I think we—people of faith / “Jesus’ own”—are sometimes one of Jesus’ toughest audiences – especially when what he teaches / what he does offends us... calls us to change our ways / our understandings...

We like to think we have it all figured out. *We think we know* what is right and what is wrong... *We think we know* what Jesus really meant by his teaching / preaching... so we close ourselves off from anyone who challenges our beliefs / understandings...

And yet... isn’t that what God does? Through the Spirit... God keeps pushing us / nudging us along... challenging our “rock solid” understandings... erasing the lines we’ve drawn to keep certain people out / expanding the circle (and our hearts and minds)... because it’s the only way to get us “hear” what God is saying to us here and now (in this time and place)... to “hear” scripture as it speaks to us today as we seek to live out our faith in the complexities of this world... to be open to the working of the Spirit who blows where it wills (often where we least expect it)...

Dear friends, the last thing God wants for us is to get too “set in our ways” (religiously speaking)... to not be open to the Spirit’s leading and teaching... to not be open to change when and where it is needed. So God keeps sending prophets to speak God’s Word to us / to call us to repentance... to “disturb” us when we get too comfortable in our ways... to wake us up / shake us up / turn us around...

Are we open to hearing Jesus’ word for us... today?

Does our skepticism / our closed minds and hearts / our unbelief / our “thinking we know” limit his power in our midst... as it did in his hometown of Nazareth?

Are we open to his call and commission (received in baptism)—“*to proclaim Christ through word and deed... to care for others and the world God made... to work for justice and peace*” for all?

Because Jesus is still sending his disciples out—he is still sending us out into our neighborhoods / towns... to the people who will receive us / invite us into their homes and lives... as we share the good news of God’s kingdom / tell them about the God who has come to mean so much to us...

We don’t need a special script of any sort / polished words to do this.

We just need to speak truth in love... from the heart... in our own words... and let the Spirit do the rest.

This is how the kingdom of God comes alive in this place—through us... through our humility / vulnerability... through our relationships... through our sharing...