

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner  
July 5, 2009  
14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Mark 6:1-6

### Going Home

I think it was earlier in the year when I confessed to you in a sermon that I have a tendency to watch “reality television” shows. Don’t worry - I still remember the groans that emanated from your midst. One of the shows I enjoy is American Idol. And one of my favorite parts of the series happens when the finalists return home before the Grand Finale. Their hometowns are always full of large crowds just waiting for them to arrive. There is always a parade down Main Street with lots of screams. The mayor usually gives the contestant the key to the city or names the day in his/her honor. Everyone on the show ends up weeping with gratitude for all of the affirmation and support. It really is a heartwarming moment, even as it gets mixed in with my distaste about the way we worship celebrity. But that is another sermon...

I could not help but think of those contestants’ journeys home as I read today’s Scripture. Because I have to wonder if Jesus and his disciples thought that would be the kind of welcome that awaited them in Nazareth. For we know from our Gospel readings this summer that Jesus’ ministry was strong. He had already cast out demons, raised people from the dead, and cured chronic illness. His reputation was getting out. People were coming from miles around to see and hear him. Like the unclean woman, people who had given up hope years ago were finding new vision and dreaming new dreams of possibility for their lives.

So don’t you imagine that Jesus was feeling pretty positive? Surely he was not immune to the tangible excitement that flowed everywhere he went. People were taking his ministry seriously. They listened. They watched. They learned. The miracles snared their attention and his preaching both convicted and inspired them. All those who were paying attention knew that this Jesus was up to something new and different in their world.

And so, I imagine as Jesus walked that road to his hometown of Nazareth on that day, he began to anticipate sharing these new events with the people who knew him the best. He might not have expected a parade, or a day in his honor, or the key to the city, but I do imagine Jesus expected that people would be glad to see him. I am sure Jesus was to see them. It would be nice to be home. He needed to reconnect with those who knew him the best.

Unfortunately for us, the Gospel of Mark tells us Jesus and the disciples arrived, but it does not give us a report of those first few moments at home. We are not sure if he went to see his mother Mary or if he went to his favorite place to eat. Rather, Mark quickly jumps to the Sabbath day and pushes us into the synagogue with Jesus. That is when the real action begins.

As Jesus walked down front to teach and preach, I am sure the congregation was beaming. I can easily imagine the looks on their faces, because I know the pride that shows on your faces when an ordained child of this church returns home to preach. Your eyes dance and you sit up a bit straighter. You feel good about the way you helped to prepare that person for ministry, as well you should. The synagogue was full of folks who felt that way about Jesus. Their eyes danced as he began to reflect on his ministry. They sat up a bit straighter as they observed his confidence while preaching.

Now, we are not sure exactly what Jesus was preaching to his home congregation on that day. In Mark's Gospel, the biblical text is silent about the content of Jesus' homecoming sermon. The Gospel is not silent, however, about the congregation's reaction. Mark reports four questions in a row. The first three questions/statements are positive: "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!"

Perhaps those questions were being whispered down the pews as Jesus reported about his healings and exorcisms. Maybe he told them how the crowds were growing so big that he would often have to board a boat and go out to sea in order to teach to all of them. From the sound of those first three questions, one can imagine the appropriate pride that was filling the synagogue over their hometown boy and his ministerial success.

But then, something shifted dramatically. We are not sure exactly why or what, but something happened. Perhaps Jesus changed gears and started to speak about the importance of being with the outcast or the extreme cost of discipleship. Perhaps Jesus challenged the way they were using their money. That always starts the grumbles in church. "The minister should stick to the Bible and leave my checkbook out of it." Or maybe, Jesus decided to really push them and told them they were stuck in a spiritual rut and needed to re-envision who they were to be as God's people in that place.

We are not sure exactly what he preached, but we do hear the shift in the response. For the fourth question we read has a definite grumbling sound underneath it. "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" Eugene Peterson breezily translates their growing muttering as "Just who does he think he is?" Clearly, their pride and admiration had quickly morphed into irritation and offense. They wanted to know just who he thought he was, coming into their synagogue, preaching to them like that, and challenging the way they had always done things around there. Why, he was no more than a hometown boy putting on airs. He was just Jesus, the carpenter, son of Mary (a clear stab at the mysterious conception). There was no way God was speaking through him.

You can just see the crowd leaving the synagogue one by one as Jesus continued to preach. Some quietly slipped out, shaking their heads. Others loudly stood up, making their disapproval obvious as they stomped out of the room. But Jesus kept on preaching, until finally, the room was almost empty. Jesus stared out at the empty space and sadly reflected "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their

own kin, and in their own house.” I am sure his disciples were wide-eyed in response to this unfortunate turn of events.

They all got up and went outside. But all of the excitement had drained away. No parades. No special day. No key to the city. Actually, people refused to have much to do with them. Jesus noticed a few sick people who had not been around during his growing-up years. Their hearts were open to him and Jesus healed them. But the rest of the familiar crowd merely turned their backs and went on with their daily business. Jesus, feeling the deep pain of being rejected by those who knew him the best, shook his head in amazement at their unbelief. “Don’t they know that God can do a new, miraculous thing even through the familiar?” And he and the disciples had no choice but to go on their way.

It is a sad story, isn’t it. But, it is also a story that we can keep at a distance. We can easily treat it like we treat all the other stories that involve people rejecting Jesus and God’s ability to work through him. “Silly Nazarenes. Silly Pharisees. Silly disciples<sup>i</sup>. Don’t they know who Jesus is? Can’t they see what God is doing in their lives?” It is easy to keep this story at a distance. Back then, those people were so blind to God. Back then, those people did not think that God would do new things even through the familiar. Too bad for them. They missed out on a whole new way of life.

For example, I imagine that some of those people in Nazareth had been burned by a synagogue a time or two in their past. Maybe they served on one of its governing boards and saw church conflict at its worst. Or, maybe they had trusted a rabbi, only to have that trust betrayed when it turned out the rabbi was painfully human and made some real mistakes. Perhaps they had joined thinking that people at the synagogue would automatically be nicer to one another than the people out in the “real” world. So when the scales fell from their eyes as they heard gossip around the coffee pots, or saw disagreements on the Session, they quickly became disillusioned. “Why the synagogue is no different than anywhere else,” they thought, “It’s not worth my time or support. Maybe I’ll start spending some more Sunday mornings with golf or the newspaper. God is clearly not doing anything new at that place with those people. It is hopeless.” And Jesus would shake his head in amazement at their unbelief.

Or, perhaps some of those people in Nazareth were stuck in unhealthy relationships with family or friends. Their conversations with each other were so predictable and painful. Every time they shared a holiday meal, the zingers would fly and everyone else would take cover from the shrapnel of their covert war<sup>ii</sup>. “I will never be able to forgive her because of what she did to me,” one would repeat again and again. “You just cannot trust him,” another would keep telling himself. It was always the same—angry, pinched conversations; a fake attempt to make peace; and walking on eggshells for the rest of the visit. “I give up,” one would conclude. “Nothing is ever going to change. God won’t do anything new in this family. It is hopeless.” And Jesus would shake his head in amazement at their unbelief.

Or I imagine some of those Nazarenes had grown weary of praying for peace and justice when all they kept seeing was war and violence. “Come quickly, Lord,” they would pray every morning. But every day there would be another story on the front page about threats of war or increasing tensions in Afghanistan. “Please shower down your peace,” they would plead before bedtime. But then they would turn on the television to see 24/7 coverage of the life of Michael Jackson but very little coverage of the lives of those suffering in refugee camps in Sudan, or with job loss in Detroit, or in fear at the domestic abuse shelter in Irving. And after a while, their hearts would start to harden. “I cannot pray anymore,” they would decide. “Obviously, God is not going to do anything new in this world. Things are just going to keep circling the drain. It is hopeless.” And Jesus would shake his head in amazement at their unbelief.

I mean to tell you-- thank goodness we can keep this story at a distance. Those Nazarenes. Didn't they know that God could even do new things with a church? Didn't they know that God could even work through the same committee meetings and Session retreats, giving fresh vision for who they could be there in Nazareth and how that synagogue could serve God's mission in the world?

Those Nazarenes. Didn't they know that God was never finished with them? Didn't they know that God could heal wounded relationships and bring about forgiveness?

Those Nazarenes. Didn't they know that God's Spirit was still powerfully present in their world? That even if they cried peace, peace but they saw no peace, that God was still going to make a way out of no way? That God was still using their prayers and their service to shower down a steady rain of divine presence? That God promised the day when all would be well and all tears would be dried forever and God would deliver?

Those Nazarenes. Didn't they know that it was never hopeless and God could and would do new things even through the familiar?

That hometown crowd missed out on so much by letting their imaginations get locked up by low-expectations and mere predictability. They missed out on Jesus' ministry to them. They missed out on a whole new way of life. All they heard and saw was just a hometown kid putting on airs. God would do nothing new through familiar Jesus.

Those Nazarenes. Things could have been so different for them. God would have moved so powerfully in their lives and in their community.

It is a sad story, isn't it. So thank goodness there is so much distance between their stories and ours.

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<sup>i</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. “Sapping God's Strength.” Bread of Angels. Boston, MA: Cowley Press. 1997. page 107.

<sup>ii</sup> This line comes from a David Wilcox song, “Your Covert War.”