

WHO IS JESUS ANYWAY?

TEXT: Mark 6:1-13

How many of us are not natives of Western Washington? I'm from Chicago (we never need to name the state), others are from North Carolina, Kansas, Iowa. Anyone here born outside of the United States? For most of us, it is a special occasion when we are able to visit our home town, and especially when we can get together with folks from our past and compare notes on what has transpired in the years we've been apart. Homecomings, for whatever reason, are special times. I'm looking forward to the last week-end in September when my high school class will celebrate its 65-year reunion, scheduled to be our last such event, as the planning committee is tired. So this year I really look forward to going home.

So it was for Jesus. It was early in his ministry and he had been traveling around Galilee and had done some good preaching around the countryside. He had attained some notoriety and although his name was not yet a household word, stories of his exploits had been circulating in the region.

So our story today from the Gospel of Mark relates the first time Jesus entered his hometown synagogue. His successful activity in neighboring synagogues, like Capernaum, would have led folks to expect positive results here as well. Also, the healing we heard about last week occurred in the home of a neighboring synagogue leader. However, these positive welcomings did not continue here.

So, what happened? It takes us kind of by surprise that Jesus' initial reception in Nazareth was not a positive one. The rejection of Jesus in this story has never been entirely clear to me. I am more familiar with instances where a small town celebrates, even exaggerates the success stories of locals who have made it big (think Kurt Cobain).

The audience in Nazareth is "astonished" at Jesus' "wisdom". This was contrary to the reaction of some earlier audiences, where they were astounded because Jesus was

teaching them as one with authority, unlike the scribes. But in his home town, perhaps they were remembering the little guy, that son of the carpenter Joseph, and just couldn't come to terms with the changes in Jesus. The amazement of his earlier audiences turned negative as the crowd vocalized a series of questions that led them to the issue of Jesus' own origins. The hometown folks seemed to know all too well from where he came. If anyone had the right to question Jesus' origins, it would be those who knew him best.

Can't you just picture Jesus' hometown family and friends squirming in their synagogue seats and craning their necks to see if he's coming up the center aisle as they wait for his arrival. The hometown boy is coming to bring the morning message. He's bringing his entourage with him. As his family and former neighbors sit waiting, I bet they were preparing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps they were saying to each other, "Even if he's not that good a speaker, we need to encourage him, because he's just getting started". His home townies don't know who they're waiting for. They think they're waiting for the boy who knows how to make the best shelves in town. They think they're waiting for the familiar sibling of James, Joses, Judas, Simon, and his sisters (who are not named, of course). They think they are waiting for the obedient son of Mary.

Jesus is "on the move". And his hometown folks can't wait to see him. They want him to be both safe and good for their economy. The town sign maker is yawning: he stayed up late last night finishing the banner that is now draped across the entry gate to town that says "Welcome to Nazareth, home of Jesus". The City Council members on the front row are all abuzz. They can't wait to show him the drawings for his Ministry Center to be built on some prime real estate just south of town. They've made him a website and set up a blog and a twitter account for him. Now here he is striding down the aisle of the synagogue.

And then Mark simply says, "he began to teach". Luke gives us a little better account of what Jesus said, why the people responded as they did, and what they then tried to do. Luke had him reading from Isaiah 61, strongly implying a Messianic identity,

and then offering a litany of non-Jews who had more faith than his hometown congregation. I guess it's understandable that this lovely homecoming ends not with a strawberry festival in the grove, but with a mass attempt to hurl the hometown boy off a cliff.

So what happened? How did the initial very positive reception of Jesus go south? Did they wonder if Jesus was "crazy smart" and then decide that he was just crazy? His own family had come to get him because they thought he had "gone out of his mind". In their wonder about the depth of his knowledge and authority did they decide that he got it all from a demonic source? In a social system where status was understood as fixed and honor/shame considerations were important, did they simply regard it as impossible for Jesus to amount to anything? Did they just brush him off saying "Who does he think he is?"

So – who is Jesus anyway? The identity of Jesus is a consistent issue in Mark. In his gospel we hear the opinions of rulers, religious authorities, crowds, disciples, and family members. For the author of Mark, the important question keeps coming around to "who do you – the reader – say that Jesus is?" How we answer that question tells us a lot about our own faith. Do you believe Jesus can do miracles? Yes, of course, is my immediate, glib answer. I have never doubted that Jesus did miracles, and even still does them. In our story today, Jesus was unable to do any miracles on his return to Nazareth – because the people of his home town did not have faith in him. To them he wasn't much more than a builder of things, but certainly couldn't have the wisdom to perform miracles. To them, he was just showing off, trying to one-up all of the citizens of the town.

So, what or who is Jesus to you? A friend? A constant companion? A role model? A savior? The Son of God? For me, it is clear that Jesus was sent by God to teach, to heal – in so many ways. Jesus is the center of our faith who has dramatically changed lives and how we live. Jesus challenges us to change both ourselves and our society- and he provides guidance on how to do it.

No other person has ever attracted such attention, devotion, criticism, adoration, and opposition as Jesus. He is the focal point of all theological discussions. Philosophers and historians have studied him. He lived over 2000 years ago in the small country of Israel, yet for centuries his birthday has divided the years into “before and after”.

His ministry lasted only three brief years, yet his message travels around the world by radio and television. He had no formal education, yet his life caused the founding of more colleges, seminaries and universities than any other person. Multiply that by thousands of schools, hospitals and orphanages that have been built in his name.

Yet, in the face of the power of Rome, Jesus had no power. I’d like to quote one of my favorite writers, Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, who wrote this in his July 4th message:

“Christianity is a bit embarrassed by the powerless one, Jesus. We’ve made his obvious defeat into a glorious victory. Let’s face it, we feel more comfortable with power than with powerlessness and poverty. Who wants to be like Jesus on the cross? It just doesn’t look like a way of influence, a way of access, a way that’s going to make any difference in the world.

“We worship this naked, homeless, bleeding loser, crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem, but we want to be winners...at least until we learn to love the so-called little, poor people – and then we often see they are not little at all, but better images of the soul. Yes, those with mental and physical disabilities, minority groups, LGBTQIA folks, refugees, prisoners, those with addictions, those without financial wealth – all who have “failed” in our social or economic success system – can be our best teachers in the ways of the Gospel. They represent what we are most afraid of and what we most deny within ourselves. That’s why we must learn to love what first seems like our ‘enemy’.

“If we look at all the wars of history, we’ll see that God has unwittingly been enlisted on both sides of the fight. It’s easy to wonder what God does when both sides are praying for God’s protection. Trusting Jesus as the archetypal pattern of God’s presence and participation on Earth, I believe *God is found wherever the suffering is*. I

believe this because that is precisely where Jesus goes. He makes heroes of the outsiders and underdogs in almost all his parables and stories. To miss that point is culpable and chosen ignorance. The awakened and aware ones – like Jesus and Francis of Assisi – go where people are suffering, excluded, expelled, marginalized, and abused. And there they find God.

”Imagine, brothers and sisters, how different Western history and religion could have been if we had walked as tenderly and lovingly upon the earth as Francis and Jesus did. Imagine what the world would be like if we treated others with inherent and equal dignity and respect, seeing the divine DNA in ourselves and everyone else too – regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, appearance, or social class. Nothing less offers the world any lasting future. We must be honest about that – and rather quickly, I think.”

It’s been over 2000 years since Jesus made his grand homecoming in Nazareth, and we are still trying to learn who is really is. Father Richard makes some strong points, and if we listen closely to his wise words, maybe some day we’ll figure out just how much we need Jesus in the world today. Amen.