

“The Problem of Familiarity”

Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

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Humans are excellent at taking something good and blessed and life-giving and transforming it into something dehumanizing, addicting, or soul-sucking. It's almost like we have a superpower, though I guess it would make us supervillains rather than superheroes. It's also true that we are incredibly inventive in coming up with ways to improve the world, but we particularly excel at transmogrifying something that was made by God to be a blessing for us into something that can so easily be a curse. It goes back to the beginning, or very nearly: when God created the world He called it very good, and He placed us in it to be its stewards and basically gave us all of creation to enjoy and take care of, but we rebelled against His authority and the result was the curse of being separated from the giver of all good things. The curse is described in those first few chapters of the book of Genesis, and one part of it is that the good work God made us for, the work of taking care of the world and enjoying its bounty, now becomes *toil*: futility and sweat and uncertainty now characterize our work that should have been characterized only by goodness.

In similar fashion, we take the goodness and blessedness of sexuality and intimacy, and we dehumanize ourselves and others through pornography. We take the blessing of work, which was meant to give us an avenue for creativity and contribution, and we turn it into drudgery and oppression. We take the delight of food and turn it into an obsession and even a deadly sin. We take the refreshment of drink and abuse it until it becomes the sickness of alcoholism and a means of deadening the pain rather than facing reality. We take the many good things of this world God created, and we elevate them to the point of worshiping that which can neither hear nor see, and certainly cannot save us. We take our good minds given to us by God, and we use them to convince ourselves that we're better off without Him, thank you very much. It's our superpower. That's not being pessimistic, that's being realistic about the consequences of trying to live apart from the source of life, what we call the sinful nature.

I draw our attention to this rather sobering fact because of our gospel story for today. It's the source of one of those sayings that has made its way from the Bible into the world's cultural vocabulary: Jesus' wise and practical observation that "a prophet is not without honor except in his own town." Some of you can attest to the truth of that. No matter what great things you accomplish in life or what skills you cultivate or how far you advance, those accomplishments are always at least a little bit diminished when you're around people who knew you when you were in diapers. It's not that they have no respect for you, it's just that they know you a little too well. Speaking personally, there's a certain advantage to pastoring a church 500-odd miles from where I grew up; none of you know any embarrassing stories from my childhood or teenage years.

It was especially true in Jesus' context, where there was much more of a sensitivity to people who seemed to think themselves too good for their roots. For the vast majority of people, the expectation was that you would do what your parents and grandparents and all the generations before them had done. You would work the same land or practice the same trade that your family had done for as long as anyone knew, and if you tried to claim a position of greater honor than your ancestors, you might in fact end up shaming them by thinking you're better than them. Maybe it's not

unlike how some people today might react to a small town kid who leaves home for the big city; maybe they're a little too big for their britches.

That's what's underlying this strange little story of Jesus' homecoming. He's been out in the region preaching the message of the kingdom of God, healing the sick, casting out demons, and even raising the dead, but when He comes home, "He could not do any miracles there" because of their lack of faith. His family and friends are astonished by His teachings, but not in a good way. They respond with a "just who does he think he is" attitude, and they try to cut Him back down to size by making comments about His upbringing. "Isn't this the carpenter? Aren't these his family members? Don't we know this kid and his place better than he seems to?" You know those kinds of comments. Being passive-aggressive is hardly a recent invention.

And Mark's gospel says something that is unique in the gospels, as far as I can tell. He says that Jesus "was amazed at their lack of faith." It's not unusual for people to lack faith, but it's rare for their lack to be so lacking that it amazes Jesus. Lots of people are amazed by Jesus, and sometimes Jesus is amazed by people, and occasionally He is even amazed by their faith. Once He is amazed by the faith of a Gentile, that is, someone who wasn't raised with the promises of God and, everyone thought, should have been completely faithless. But here Jesus is amazed by the lack of faith of the people who knew Him best.

They knew Him too well, it seems. They were so familiar with the Incarnate God of the universe that, in fact, they thought they had a pretty good handle on Him, that they knew His place, that it was offensive to them for Him to act in ways they did not expect. You see the problem. We have a knack for taking God's blessings and transmogrifying them into a curse. They had the incredible blessing of living in close proximity to Jesus for decades, arguably getting closer to Him than even the Apostles did, and they took their familiarity and turned it into comfort, control, and even disrespect. And Jesus was amazed by their lack of faith.

We preach the good news that the kingdom of God has arrived through the presence of Jesus Christ our Lord, and part of what that implies is that God is not distant, God has not abandoned us, God has come near to us and in fact has taken up human flesh to walk among us as one of us so that we can be reconciled to Him, so we can draw near once again to the source of life, so we can turn our backs on the problem of sin that so easily ensnares and destroys us. The kingdom of God has arrived, and therefore we can know God; He has shown us who He is. That's good news. But familiarity breeds contempt, as the old saying goes. A prophet is without honor in his home town. It is extremely easy, in other words, for us to take the nearness of God for granted. We can think that because God is approachable, He is controllable, or that because He loves us, He is tame. Or we can allow our familiarity with the Creator of the universe to become complacency, comfort, and apathy. It is certainly true that God invites us to be His beloved children, heirs of His kingdom, who have the privilege of boldly coming before His sacred throne, but we dare not allow ourselves to forget that it is a privilege.

The different gospel accounts of Jesus' life put different emphases on different parts of the story, and they sometimes tell parts of the story in a different order. It's interesting, then, what Mark's gospel puts immediately after this story of a prophet without honor in His home town. There's this important moment in Jesus' ministry when He sends out His followers as His ambassadors to

preach and to live out the arrival of the kingdom. And His instructions are pretty specific: they go out with nothing for their journey, seemingly unprepared, trusting in the hospitality of the people they encounter. It seems like poor planning, but that in itself is an important sign that the kingdom has arrived: these are ambassadors who deserve to be received as such, and they trust in the authority and the power of the Lord whose arrival they are proclaiming.

The people in Jesus' home town who know Him so well are amazing in their lack of faith, and the presence of the kingdom of God in their midst is therefore lackluster. The immediate contrast is the people who go boldly and fearlessly announcing and trusting in the kingdom. The first group are so familiar and comfortable with Jesus that they can't see what He's doing right in front of them, while the second group are stretched and must trust in their Lord's word, and they proclaim the coming of the kingdom with fresh voices to closed ears, and the kingdom breaks out in front of them.

In other words, we're very good at getting too comfortable in dealing with God stuff. Rituals can become empty, words can become formulas, prayers can become vain repetition, Holy Scripture can become magic spells or bedtime stories, and the God of all creation can become nonthreatening, powerless, and domesticated. Our familiarity can make Him into either our pet God or just an abstract idea that we confine to philosophical debates and moral what-ifs. But the antidote to familiarity is discomfort and deliberate growth.

Our natural selves would much rather take it easy, relax, and coast. But the simple truth is that we are most able to see God at work when we are forced out of our complacency and forced to trust Him. It's easy to say you trust Him when you don't have to, but it's easier to *actually* trust Him when you don't have a choice. So those times when we are stretched, when we're hurting, when we're at our wit's end, when we've listened to that unexpected voice of God and gone and done something that doesn't make sense to other people, when the things we normally rely on have been yanked out from under us and the only thing we can stand on is trusting that God will provide, that's when we're most likely to see God do something powerful.

We also read a passage from 2 Corinthians, a passage that is part of Paul's larger argument to the church at Corinth defending his authority as a leader in the church. Our sermon a couple of weeks ago was focused on how Paul uses his struggles and weaknesses as his commendations, and he continues that theme in our passage for today. He speaks of boasting, and how he could boast about many things if he wanted to, but instead he boasts about his "thorn in the flesh," "a messenger of Satan," that was given to him to torment him. No one really knows what this thorn in the flesh was, but the usual assumption is that it was some physical sickness or injury that limited him. He pleaded with God to take it from him, but came to realize that God's grace is "sufficient," because God's "power is made perfect in weakness." Those are not the words we want to hear, because it reinforces our conclusion that we can see God most powerfully at work when we are at our least comfortable. Paul's conclusion: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

So this leaves us with a call upon our walk with God. In our weakness, the strength of God is displayed. In our discomfort, God's goodness is poured out. In our stepping out, God's kingdom is revealed. We must therefore always ask the Holy Spirit to lead us in taking one step beyond our

strength and comfort. Is there someone in your life who needs you to share the love of Christ with them, but you've been holding back because it's more comfortable to stay silent? Is there some dark place in our community that needs to have the truth and hope of Christ's kingdom spoken boldly into it, but fear has held you back? Is there some thorn in your flesh that you've been harboring bitterness toward, rather than recognizing it as a chance to display God's power in your weakness? Is there some spiritual practice, an act of prayer or worship or confession, that you need to take up even though it will stretch you? Is there a way that you can be deliberate in your spiritual growth, through study or mentoring, to learn to feed yourself and stretch your mind? Is there a way you can build challenge into your habits of walking with God? God has come near to us in Christ so that we can know Him, but in knowing Him, His strength is shown in our weakness.



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