

## Fifth Sunday After Epiphany - Mark 6:1-29 - February 4, 2024

Mark continues the quick pace he started in the first chapter of his gospel. Today we see him zoom through three stories or events: Jesus rejected at Nazareth, Jesus sends out the twelve disciples, the death of John the Baptist. This is a stunning shift in the story. Jesus enters his hometown synagogue. His successful activity in neighbouring synagogues, like Capernaum, would have led Mark's audience to expect positive results here as well.

In the preceding chapters, Jesus calmed the great storm at sea, drove out a legion of unclean spirits, healed a woman with a twelve-year flow of blood, and raised a young girl from the dead. All this wonderful work, and the hometown folks are offended. After all, he was **just** a carpenter's son. Even his own family did not understand his true identity.

There is something raw about Mark's account of Jesus' life. Jesus has come home to preach, and of course the town folk know all about him; after all, they watched him grow up. That isn't easy. With Jesus, and especially in Mark's account, it goes even deeper, because while he is described as "a carpenter" and his mother Mary is referenced, no father is mentioned. Mark either doesn't know Joseph or doesn't think he's important. This suggests that there may have been some whispering going on about Jesus while he grew up: was he brought up only by his mother? Did he even have a father at home? Is there some hint of impropriety here?

The point is that when the crowd places him, it's not just sentimentality that's operative, but the whole thing may also be a way of positioning Jesus, of putting him in his place. This means that their reaction might not be so much of a "Wow, look at the local boy made good!" as it is,

“Well, look who’s coming back, and too big for his britches to boot, but we remember where you came from boy.”

The audience’s “astonishment” at Jesus’ “wisdom” – perhaps a reference to his parables – would remind readers of the first synagogue appearance in which the spectators were “astounded” because “he was teaching them as one with authority, unlike the scribes.”

On this occasion, however, the amazement immediately turned negative as the crowd vocalized a series of questions that led them to the issue of Jesus’ own origins. And they – the hometown folk – seemed to know all too well from where he came. If anyone had the right to question Jesus’ origins, it should be those who knew him best.

They simply cannot get past the fact that they know him and they know from where and from whom he has come. It seems that the people are offended by Jesus breaking the mold of their preconceived notions of who they are and who they can be. According to them, the identity of Jesus can be summed up with his occupation, parentage, and sibling connections. There is no room to receive anything from him beyond that. This tension between Jesus and his family or hometown was an ongoing sub-plot of the story.

Despite the hometown’s assessment, Jesus provided an alternative self-designation: “prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown.” By referring to himself as a “prophet,” he associated himself with a long line of counter-cultural figures within Israel. In the Gospel of Mark, others would also view him in this way.

In an honour/shame society, typical of the Ancient Middle East,

“prophets” would have received honour. But the traditional wisdom of the age was that this occurred generally in places in which prophets were less familiar. According to the cultural more in antiquity:

**Honour was a limited good.** If someone gained, someone else lost. To be recognized as a ‘prophet’ in one’s own town meant that honour due to other persons and other families was diminished - honour was a limited quantity. Claims to more than one’s appointed (at birth) share of honour, threatened others and would eventually trigger attempts to cut the claimant down to size.

Who knew that honour was a quantified quality? This was the issue at stake. So, perhaps they felt that Jesus’ fame threatened their well-being in some way. Whatever honour Jesus gains - hometown loses.

Or maybe it was just really hard for them to imagine that someone as ordinary as and perhaps someone with as tainted a background or upbringing as Jesus, could possibly make good. Perhaps, they just could not reconcile the ordinary with the extraordinary and somehow felt shown up by comparison.

Whatever the reason, they refuse to acknowledge him and this somehow seems to limit Jesus’ power. Which, when you consider his ability to raise a dead girl to life with a single word or, all that the woman who had been bleeding for so long had to do, was touch the fringe of his cloak to be healed, is really pretty astounding.

Mark seems to suggest that Jesus’ reception affects his ability to work, to establish the kingdom of God through what he calls “**deeds of power.**” Their reaction seemed to surprise Jesus. Such “faith,” or lack thereof, “unbelief,” amazes even Jesus! Furthermore, the absence of faith challenged Jesus’ ability to perform healing miracles.

On the one hand, it was clear that Jesus' healing authority was intimately interrelated with the faith of others. On the other hand, Jesus could overcome the absence of faith when he desired to do so. Throughout the story, Mark promoted faith as a critical element in the healing mission of Jesus. But faith was not *essential*. Faith was not a necessary condition in any absolute sense. God's freedom cannot be limited in that way.

We are not responsible for faith. Faith is born of the Spirit when we encounter the story of Jesus. It is the story of Jesus that initiates and calls us to faith. Faith springs to life at this intersection. If faith is not created, we come again and again, for the promise of God is faithful to us in and through the story of Jesus.

Those who should have been the real insiders, the hometown folk, prove to be outsiders. What kind of soil are these people? According the Parable of the Sower, which we heard a couple of weeks ago, they represent the seed that fell on the path, was trod on, and snatched up by the birds.

The rejection of Jesus' hometown synagogue did not hinder the mission for long. It may have given impetus to the commissioning of the twelve for their first assignment. This was why Jesus had chosen the "twelve." Right from the point of selection, they were being prepared for their own mission. We heard Jesus teaching about the nature of God's reign, comparing it to the sowing of the Word by telling the Parable of the Sower.

Last week, we saw Jesus perform liberating acts for them to witness. Finally, he sent out the disciples. Are the twelve sent out because they are men of great faith? Hardly! And their hardness of heart, inability to

understand, will continue to grow. But, in spite of lack of understanding and fear, the twelve are sent on a mission to do what Jesus does in his mission. When they return, they are called “apostles” for the first and only time in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus is preparing them for ministry beyond his death.

Differences in the Gospel accounts may simply have reflected the various missionary strategies in early Christianity. However, dependence on hosts would be important in each Gospel strategy. And, there are two other significant features in Mark which should be highlighted. First, they were to continue the Jesus movement in *households*. This was not unanticipated, in light of Jesus’ own successful activity in the homes surrounding Galilee. In this narrative, Jesus’ message and activity in the synagogues had been growing less impressive as the story went on, including the latest rejection. Synagogues, with the established religious traditions and authorities were not always susceptible to new ideas and activities that may have represented a new move of God!

So, Jesus prepared his disciples for potential rejection. Wherever rejection existed, so would judgment: “shake off the dust that is on your feet.” Along with the disciples, we’re called to let go of anything or anyone that might be a hindrance; that might keep workers of the Gospel from fully and faithfully discharging their duties. Jesus is about the ministry of proclaiming the Good News to as many people as possible, demonstrating the power of God to heal along the way. Such a calling becomes the calling of the twelve. Such a calling becomes our calling as well.

The report of John’s death, Jesus’ mentor, was the end of innocence for Jesus’ mission. Placing this account between the commission and the

return of the twelve disciples, during the heart of the expansion of the Jesus movement, Mark replayed the story of John and Herod as a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death at the hands of Pilot, a political, though sympathetic, figure.

Mark chose this opportunity, after Jesus sent out his disciples on their first formal mission, to report the death of John the Baptist. Mark hinted at this political death earlier in the story when John was arrested, but saved the rest of the story until today's episode. Using intercalation - that is the "sandwich" technique once again, Mark placed this account between the commission and the return of the disciples to intimate its significance for the expansion of Jesus' mission.

This scene is not an interlude. John's death was intimately tied to the mission of Jesus. This story showed Markan narrative technique at its best. Not only did John's message meet with political obstacles, so would Jesus' and so would that of his followers. John's declaration of the unlawfulness of Herod's marriage to Herodias would probably have been shared by Jesus as well. In addition, marriages of this type already had huge political implications attached to them.

Herod has heard of this Jesus whose identity is still a question. Unlike others who thought that Jesus was a "prophet," perhaps Elijah, Herod thought that Jesus was a resurrected John the Baptist. Herod's assessment made a close link between the missions of Jesus and John. According to Mark, not only was Jesus' mission initiated only *after* John's arrest, but Jesus' continual activity was viewed by the "powers that be" as intimately associated with John's. These close ties would appear again later in the story.

The length and detail of this account were also significant. Luke omits the story and Matthew's version is abbreviated. Mark's version was filled with detail and intrigue. Only Mark's audience would have discovered other views of Jesus, besides Herod's, including Herodias' grudge and call for John's death, the specific conversation between Herodias and her daughter. Mark tells of Herod's love/hate relationship with John. He hated him for telling him it was unlawful to marry his brother's wife. At the same time, Herod feared *John himself*, considering him a "righteous and holy man." Herod "protected" John until the request came for his head. But more than that. Herod called upon John at secret times for spiritual counsel. Herod heard John. The seed was sown!

The first half of Mark's Gospel centres around the message in the Parable of the Sower. Herod is a prime example of seeds sown among thorns, as was Pilate, and the rich ruler who could not give up his riches and the lure of earthly power. Thorny ground people hear the word, but the cares of the world, and lure of wealth, desire for other things, come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And so it was that the cares of the world choked out the word Herod heard. The seed John sowed in this case, yielded nothing.

Even after his agreement to fulfill his oath, Herod "deeply grieved." This same word used, deeply grieved, in the Greek, was used only here and later to describe Jesus' feelings in Gethsemane! In light of the description of Herod's attitude towards John, this was a sincere contrite feeling. Mark's "Herod" was a sympathetic figure, whose public oath became his own demise. In the biblical tradition, oaths were not easily dismissed among Jews. The tension was depicted clearly.

Many scholars and movie makers have imagined a highly charged

sexual event in the dance of Herodias' daughter, partly due to Western scholarship's interpretive views of the "Orient." This interpretation has been rightly challenged. Mark simply writes that she "came in and danced, and she pleased Herod and his guests." It is obvious that agents of God who challenge those in power, usually suffer significant consequences.

Ministry is lived out in the midst of all kinds of people who fit a similar description of "thorny ground" people. What cares today choke out the seed that is planted? What makes thorny soil? Greed? Pride? The lure of more stuff? Not caring about others? The one who came to transform sinners into saints can also transform "thorny ground" people into "good soil people." This Sower will keep sowing, again and again and again, as long as it takes to eradicate our thorns, and let the seeds of the Sower find the good soil of our hearts and take root, producing a great yield - thirty, sixty, and even one hundredfold. The Sower's, the disciples' call is to fill our hearts with good soil, where the seed, the Word of God, can take root.

On September 20, 1989, a sower sowed his seeds. The place was in the city of Pretoria, in the country of South Africa. On that September day, F.W. de Klerk was inaugurated as President of South Africa. Unlike leaders of many other nations at that time, de Klerk regularly went to church. No one in South Africa was surprised that, on the day of his inauguration, he invited his favourite pastor, a white man named Pieter Bingle, to lead a worship service in Pretoria.

Everybody gathered. The people sang some familiar hymns. They prayed well-polished prayers. Then Pastor Bingle stood up in the pulpit to speak. As Bingle spoke, he said, "Mr. de Klerk, as our new President,



you are standing in the council chamber of God. God is calling you to do his will. Today God calls you to serve as the President of South Africa. His commission is not to serve as the President of some of the people, but as the President of all the people of South Africa."

By the time of the benediction, de Klerk was weeping. He called his family and friends together and said, "Pray for me. God has told me what I must do. And if I do it, I will be rejected by my own people. Pray for me, that I might do the will of God." Soon thereafter, de Klerk took steps to release Nelson Mandela. Then he began to negotiate with the African National Congress as he worked to dismantle the system of Apartheid. It happened because someone sowed the seed and the seed produced a great yield.

**Amen.**

## **PRAYERS FOR SUNDAY FEBRUARY 4, 2024**

Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving and joy, bringing all the sick, the suffering, the marginalised, the refugees and the uprooted before God, knowing that God can dispel our darkness with the light of Christ. May we and our communities be lights that guide others to Christ Jesus as we offer you our prayers.

Compassionate God, who sent Jesus Christ to deliver us from all manner of injustices and inequalities, create in us new hearts and enlarged visions, to see the image of God in every person irrespective of background, race and ethnicity. May we be generous in our love of others as we work towards ending misunderstanding, racism and injustice.

God of all peoples, whose Son reached across the ethnic boundaries between Samaritan, Roman and Jew, help us to break down the barriers in our communities, enable us to see the reality of racism and bigotry, and free us to challenge and uproot it from ourselves, our society and our world.

We pray for all victims of racial hatred and discrimination, and we seek your protection for those affected in our churches, our schools, our places of work, and communities.

We pray for all in your world, of whatever race, who suffer the horrors of modern slavery. Your Son came to bring good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed. We pray for all working to combat modern slavery and to end human trafficking: for governments and agencies for church and other faith leaders, for businesses, charities, and individuals.

We pray for ourselves. May we be voices against oppression and channels of the transforming power of the gospel. Open our hearts to all who suffer in our midst but out of sight. Help us to work for a world where human beings are valued, where no one is enslaved, and no one used against their will for another's pleasure or need.

We pray that we may know the power of reconciliation. Wherever there is division between us and others, because of our race or ethnicity, we pray that we may all be led to reconciliation. We pray for all who work to bring communities together in ways that are just and equal for all.

As we pray for reconciliation, we pray also for restoration. We pray for those whose spirits and communities have been weighed down by racism. Guide us as we strive to ensure everyone has equal dignity.

We pray for those whose lives are lived in the turmoil of immigration, in the desperation of poverty, in the fear of illness and treatment, in the struggles for freedom and justice, in the weariness of war, in the Middle East, Ukraine, South Sudan and conflicts throughout the world.

We pray for civilians caught up in the wars: Aid personnel, medical personnel, volunteers and journalists. We acknowledge those who work as journalists, for their courage, to stand in each moment gathering the facts, running the cameras and sound, transmitting reports to their news agencies, that then assemble the stories that are filtered and flow out to the media. In the Israel Gaza war 85 journalists and media workers are confirmed dead: 16 are reported injured, 3 missing, and 25 are reported arrested. Protect those who offer their life to tell our stories.

We pray for our churches in the changing world; for Bishops Susan and Kathy, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, Bishops of the Moravian Worldwide church, all pastors, priests, deacons, councils, musicians, and lay leaders; for St. Paul's Lutheran in Maple Ridge, for Matsqui Lutheran, Matsqui, for Our Saviour's Lutheran in Prince George whose water pipes froze and burst, causing significant water damage, and the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

We pray for all in need. Provide caring communities for all who are burdened by guilt, shame, and addiction. We pray for all who are facing illness, medical treatments and therapies, life-altering diagnoses, prolonged healing, and at times feel lost and look to you for hope, comfort, and peace.

We pray for your creation, your holy creation. Lead us to restore the hills and valleys, lakes and rivers, forests and coast lands to the beauty you created.

Creator God, may we proclaim your good news to the world, in the ways we are each able to and in ways which can be heard by those around us. May the fire of your spirit live within us declaring your glory.

**Amen.**

With joy and gladness let us pray as Jesus taught us.

**Our Father ...**