



“Faith is Powerful”
Scripture – Mark 6:1-13
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, July 8, 2018

Most of us can tell stories about the hometown kid who made it big. My friend who came from a small town in Kansas became a celebrated NFL quarterback. The daughter of Camilla’s high school friend became the prima ballerina with the New York City Ballet. Most of us have stories about the ordinary person who turned out to be extraordinary – the unremarkable classmate who later wrote a best-seller or the girl from the next block who wound up selling her tech company for millions.

Today’s scripture passage is about the hometown boy who began to rock the world – and how the hometown folks could not wrap their heads around it. Jesus, the charismatic leader who was a reflection of God, returned to the place of his upbringing. However, the neighbors could not get past seeing him as the young man from down the road who was handy with a hammer and a chisel. They could heap on accolades about the work of his hands and even his thoughtful nature, but accept him as a prophet? A messenger from God? Impossible.

Our gospel writer tells two back-to-back stories about the power of faith – how the lack of faith can quash possibilities and how possessing faith can generate stunning results. It turns out that our personal expectations play a pivotal role in what we see and experience – AND in what we overlook.

Scientists have come up with a little game that demonstrates how difficult it is for us to notice something when we are expecting something else. Here’s how it works. You sit down at a table in front of an ordinary deck of cards. They flash six of the cards at you very quickly, and then ask you to identify them as best you can - “Let’s see, nine of diamonds, three of hearts, jack of clubs - oops, what was the next one?” Then they repeat the exercise, slowing it down a little so you can get some of the ones you missed the first time.

The third time they go through it so slowly that you begin to wonder if you are in the early stages of dementia because there is one card you still cannot identify. It is not until the cards are all laid face up on the table that you can see what the problem is. The mystery card is a six of spades, only it is red, not black. The deck has been rigged. Someone has changed the rules, rules that prevented you from seeing what was really there. You could not see a red spade because spades are supposed to be black. Sometimes our expectations prevent us from seeing what is right in front of us.¹

This seems to have been the case for the folks in Nazareth when Jesus returned to his hometown for the first time after launching his ministry. Today, Nazareth is a bustling city of traffic and commerce and a population of 75,000, but in the time of Jesus, scholars believe this hilly and rocky community had only about 50 families – most of them related to one another. Today, Nazareth covers 5 ½ square miles, in the time of Jesus it existed on the

equivalent of two football fields. In other words, the Nazareth Jesus came home to, was tiny enough for everyone to know everyone else.

To set the context for today's passage, it is the early days of Jesus' ministry. He has been traveling on foot in the verdant region around the Sea of Galilee. Each time Jesus and his followers entered a community, Jesus wowed the people with his wisdom and healed those with infirmities. Strangers quickly recognized that Jesus was one of a kind. When he taught, his words resonated with something deep in their souls. He gave people a new way of approaching life and he restored something they thought they had lost forever – hope.

Word began to travel from village to village about this amazing man who taught with authority, who possessed a healing touch, and who lit a flame in people's hearts. All Jesus had to do was step foot into a village and excitement drenched the community like a cool rain in the heat of summer.

With the wind at his back, Jesus marched up the steep hill to his home in Nazareth with his disciples tagging along. Perhaps Jesus had told his faithful followers about the warm hospitality that was sure to embrace them. Nothing is said about the day he arrived, but when the Sabbath day rolled around Jesus and his disciples went to the small synagogue.

I suspect those who had been traveling with him could not wait to see the impression Jesus made on the people from his hometown. Initially, as they would have predicted, Jesus was a hit. But within minutes, questions began to surface. Someone turned to the person sitting next to him and said, "How did he become so wise so quickly? Where did he gain his knowledge and his capacity to heal?"

Skepticism rippled through the room. Someone stood up and remarked, "Isn't he Mary's boy, the carpenter?" And the initial astonishment morphed into derision. "Hey, we know this young man. He's a laborer, not a teacher; a hireling not a healer." Their mockery was embarrassing and painful.

Can you imagine the level of frustration in Jesus? Can you picture how put out he was with his cousins and friends and neighbors for not taking him seriously? Their rejection must have stung badly. They were closed to the possibility that he was more than they thought he was and their skepticism curbed what Jesus was capable of accomplishing. Their lack of faith squelched the power of God.

We would prefer to hear the gospel writer say, "Despite the pig-headedness among the residents of Nazareth, Jesus was able to perform eye-popping miracles!" However, Mark writes that because of their refusal to believe, Jesus could do practically nothing. The episode ends with Jesus shaking his head, stunned by their lack of faith.

There is power in belief and there is power in disbelief. Our expectations play a role in how effective God's power can be. It is a bit unnerving, but we can stifle the impact God has on us. We are not little pawns on God's chessboard. We have real power that we can use to resist God's influence on us.

Fortunately, the gospel writer does not sign off with that cheery thought! After telling us how skepticism can reduce the flow of God's power to a trickle, he tells a second story about charging ahead despite setbacks because faith can expand the flow of God's power to a gusher.

After the debacle with the hometown folks, Jesus called together the 12 disciples and sent them out in pairs on a healing mission. Our passage says that Jesus ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics."

If you have ever taken a trip with your spouse or partner and you thought he was packing too many shirts or she was packing too many pairs of shoes, you might want to print this passage tape it on your refrigerator! Jesus says, “Keep it light! You don’t need all of that extra stuff.”

Why do you suppose Jesus tells the disciples to pack sparingly? Is it because Jesus cannot bear the image of his disciples with over-stuffed backpacks and pulling a rolling suitcase behind them? Or is it because he wants them to keep moving and not to settle in one place for too long?

Jesus gave one more instruction. “If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” Is Jesus licking his wounds from the beating he took in Nazareth and telling his disciples to curse those who treat them the way he was treated? Or, is he saying, “You cannot control how others will respond to you. You can only control your own actions. You can commit to God’s way and forge ahead, and not allow distractions and obstacles and other people’s attitudes to thwart your mission.”

A Presbyterian pastor in Chapel Hill shared a story about visiting one of the members of his congregation in the hospital. He said, “George was 83 years old and dying after a long battle with cancer. He was sharing random stories as he pondered his life. Apparently he had been a practical joker and told of the time he tied a rope to the rear bumper of his brother’s new car and the other to a sturdy tree. He started laughing as he remembered the puzzled look on his brother’s face when his shiny new car would not budge.”

“George began to tire and the conversation waned, so the pastor said a prayer and started to leave. But, George held onto his hand and said, ‘Can I be serious for a moment? I’ve lived a pretty good life and have no real fear of dying. But I do have regrets, it’s for the times I held back.’”

“He paused to gather his breath and then explained. ‘There were some times in my life when I might have been able to make a difference and didn’t.’”

“He told of his work as a pipe-fitter and of the time several of his co-workers harassed and then assaulted a young black worker. ‘I could have intervened, but I was scared so I held back.’ He told of the time when his daughter raised a question about his faith, particularly about his practice of tithing, and he sloughed it off with a little joke rather than treating the question with the care it warranted. ‘I missed that opportunity because I held back from saying what I really believed. She never asked me another question about my faith.’ He told of a time at a party when a friend made crude, anti-Semitic remarks about one of his Jewish friends. ‘I was offended, but instead of saying something I held back. I’ve never forgiven myself for not saying something.’”

“Still holding his pastor’s hand, he said, ‘I never hurt anyone intentionally, but I have been guilty of holding back.’ Squeezing the pastor’s hand tightly, he said, ‘Don’t hold back. You hear? Holding back ain’t never a good thing.’”²

Today’s passage shares two stories about faith. The first reveals the disturbing fact that doubt and skepticism can limit what God does in the world. The second reveals that when we are in harmony with God and our faith is strong, God can work amazing results through us.

We hold remarkable personal power. We have the freedom to embrace God’s Spirit or to ignore it. We can position ourselves to be receptive to God, or we can fill our lives with distractions. We can commit to God’s way, or we can hold way back. I have it on good authority that holding back ain’t never a good thing.

NOTES

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Apocalyptic Figs,” *Bread of Angels*, (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), p.157.
2. Michael Lindvall, “What Would You Do?” May 14, 2017.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

We lift before you those throughout the world whose lives are torn apart by conflict, those who long for safety, and those who endure unrest ...

... those who suffer under the yoke of injustice, those who have been stripped of dignity and opportunity, and those who lack food, shelter, and security ...

... those who are imprisoned to addiction, those who suffer from diseases of the body or mind, and those who know too well the pain of loss ...

We pray, O God, for our communities and for those we hold dear:
that you would bring healing wherever there is brokenness,
that you would open hearts to seek reconciliation and practice compassion,
and that you would empower us all to fuller expressions of love.

Holy God, in all things, we strive to bear witness to your grace, your love, and your peace. Sometimes — like the first followers — we are full of disbelief. Sometimes — like the disciples of old — we are slow to embrace your truth. But you, O God, open minds and transform hearts and use ordinary people for extraordinary purposes.

Fill us with hope and stir us to embrace the good news, that we might proclaim the healing love of Jesus Christ. Renew our faith, we pray, and send us out to bear witness to your grace in all places that are hungry for your hope, your peace, and your joy.

This we pray in the name of your son, Jesus the Christ, the one who gave us words to pray: **Our Father ...**