

Mark 6:1-13 (NET)

Rejection at Nazareth

^{6:1} Now Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ^{6:2} When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue. Many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did he get these ideas? And what is this wisdom that has been given to him? What are these miracles that are done through his hands? ^{6:3} Isn’t this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And aren’t his sisters here with us?” And so they took offense at him. ^{6:4} Then Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown, and among his relatives, and in his own house.” ^{6:5} He was not able to do a miracle there, except to lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. ^{6:6} And he was amazed because of their unbelief. Then he went around among the villages and taught.

Sending Out the Twelve Apostles

^{6:7} Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two. He gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ^{6:8} He instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money in their belts – ^{6:9} and to put on sandals but not to wear two tunics. ^{6:10} He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the area. ^{6:11} If a place will not welcome you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” ^{6:12} So they went out and preached that all should repent. ^{6:13} They cast out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

Knowing Becomes Unknowing

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: *Mark 6:1-13*

Our preconceptions. Our unexamined assumptions. The things we believe. Oh, how they have a hold on us. How we cling to them. How we know them to be true.

Some of you know the travails of Will B. Dunn, the hapless minister in Doug Marlette's comic strip "Kudzu." Will tries his best, but he has his work cut out for him. One time, Will had been doing a Bible study with his congregation. They had been reading and memorizing famous verses from the Bible together. Finally, Will thinks they are ready for the test. So one Sunday he shouts from the pulpit, "We've been studying the Bible together, and I'm going to give you the first part of a sentence, and I want you to fill in the rest." Will begins, "Your neighbor slaps you in the face ...". The next frame shows the congregation shouting the answers from the pews. "Hit him back." "Kick him in the shins." "Hit him up side the head with a tire tool." Will looks forlornly out at his flock and says with resignation, "I guess we need some more Bible study."

But that's not the answer, is it? Or at least it's only part of the answer.

Years ago I hung this particular comic strip on the bulletin board in the parlor. A man, who was not a parishioner here and who will go un-named, but who, if you knew him, you would say was a fine, gentle man, a Christian. He looked at the comic strip, and he shook his head. I'll never forget his next words. He looked at me and said, "You know, it's really true. It's too bad, but that turn the other cheek stuff just doesn't work in the real world, does it?" In the face of what the man already knew, the Bible had no power to persuade him.

The people in Jesus' hometown watch him work with astonishment. They are amazed by his wisdom and the power of his ideas. He teaches in the synagogue. He heals people. But then what the people already know kicks in. They know this is just the carpenter, the son of Mary and Joseph. His family lives right here among us. He's nothing special. The power and wisdom of Jesus' teaching couldn't overcome their preconceptions. In their eyes he had to be an ordinary, not-so-special man. No matter the power of his ideas, no matter the healing they saw with their very own eyes, they wrote him off because they knew he was nothing special.

Brian McLaren, the evangelical pastor and writer, tells the story of a an American pastor who was being interviewed by a British broadcaster.

The interviewer asked him why so many Christians in America unquestioningly supported the U.S. war in Iraq, when that foreign policy (the interviewer felt) was so clearly against the teachings of Jesus. The American pastor seemed surprised and a little offended, so the interviewer explained, "Jesus talked about peace and reconciliation, turning the other cheek, walking the second mile, that sort of thing. How do you reconcile that with your war?" The pastor hesitated a moment and then replied, "Well, the teachings of Jesus are personal. They have nothing to do with politics and foreign policy."

The pastor had a rock-solid preconception that Jesus wasn't against the war in Iraq. In

his case, he justified it by the equally suspect but rock-solid preconception that Jesus' message has nothing to do with foreign policy, or the affairs of the world at all. Others are equally convinced by their preconceptions that Jesus is interested in foreign policy, and he is on our side – God bless America.

What's stunning is that the preconceptions win the day either way. They know what Jesus means, so they don't actually have to listen to him.

Just one more story. It has been repeated many times. Someone says to me, "Homosexuality is an abomination to God. It says so in the Bible. God hates fags." Like the others, this is not a conversation swayed by fact. The Bible is actually quite unconcerned about homosexuality. There are a very few places where one can find prohibitions, but they are largely located among scores of other prohibitions that we do not consider important. The Bible says that we should be put to death if we work on the Sabbath. It says that eating shellfish is an abomination. And it says when you cut your hair, you're not supposed to round off the corners. I have found very few Christians picketing seafood restaurants, chanting, "If you eat from the shell, you're going to hell," or barbershops crying, "Square the hair or you're going you know where." But I've seen plenty of people over at the Statehouse protesting same-sex marriage shouting, "It's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."

But the larger point is this. The Bible and Jesus are abundantly clear about God's abiding love and mercy. And yet many know that God hates homosexuals and liberals and a bunch of other people, and they are not going to be swayed by what the Bible actually says. Like the people in Jesus' hometown, they already know what they know, and nothing's going to change it.

The text tells us that Jesus left Nazareth disheartened and amazed at their unbelief. Their knowing had so obscured their seeing that it became unknowing. Their knowing had made them ignorant.

Now, believe it or not, my purpose this morning isn't to pick a fight. Nor is it to suggest that I or we in this congregation are superior to any others. I believe that we all suffer the problem that Will B. Dunn found in his flock. We have preconceptions about Jesus and the Bible and our faith that we are sure are right, and very often these preconceptions, to which we hold dearly, prevent us from looking carefully to see what's really there.

And that's my real interest this morning: what's really there? As a congregation we stand at a new threshold. In a couple of months, God willing, we will be in a new sanctuary. We will begin building our congregation in a new neighborhood. There's something liberating about a fresh start, I think. It gives us the opportunity to imagine what kind of a congregation we want to be. We are all invited into the a new wineskin. Jesus reminds us that we ought not put old wine into a new wineskin. We are to be a new thing altogether, as the Apostle Paul would say it. Now, this does not mean that we are to abandon all tradition. What it means is that we are to awaken ourselves to what is fundamental and enlivening and true in the grand tradition that we inherit. We are invited into a new and reinvigorated relationship with the holy. We are invited to sense the Spirit of God moving in and around and among us. We are invited, as Marcus Borg would say it, to meet Jesus again for the first time.

It is an auspicious time for our congregation, but not just for our congregation. For there is a new movement, a new energy, a new love of the Gospel emerging in Christianity today. It is found neither in the acidic rhetoric of the religious right nor in the drab decline of the old

mainline. It is found among Christians who are discovering anew the power and depth of Jesus' message, and who, unlike his hometown friends are willing to put aside their preconceptions, to put aside their "been their, done that" attitude, to put aside "this is how we've always done it," and instead to look for the ways that the Spirit of Life is calling out to them.

We are fortunate to be in a time when many talented people are thinking and writing about these things. As we move into our new church home, we are busy this summer planning various study groups and other ways for us all to engage our faith.

This fall we are offering a twelve-week program called, "Living the Questions." It is a program of spiritual development for those whose questions about God and faith keep leading to more questions. Rather than suggest that the Christian faith is about finding the right answers, it wants to suggest that the Christian faith is about living into the questions that we all live with. In it you will experience video of some of the most inspiring speakers of our time, study materials and discussion that promise to deepen your faith. More information will be forthcoming, and we will have an orientation session as early in September as we can.

We will also be offering various programs of group study of the Bible. One will be a brief introduction to the study of the Bible for those who would like an overview. In another we'll look, read and listen to how Handel used the Bible in his great masterpiece the Messiah.

In addition, I have placed a number of excellent, accessible and riveting books in the store section of the church website. I think you will find many of them to be page-turners, sort of the "real" DaVinci Code. They are great summer reading, and we are planning to have discussion sessions on several of them.

Good friends, we are at a time to break free from the knowing that has become unknowing. In doing so, we will be stretched. Will B. Dunn's congregation had a hard time with the idea of loving our enemy or turning the other cheek. Many of us, probably all of us, have ideas about what Jesus and God and the church are, and we will be challenged to rethink some of them.

But the greater point is this. The people in Jesus' hometown caught a glimpse of who he was. They grasped the wisdom with which he spoke. They were astonished. They witnessed wonders and healings. And then, they laid their hands over their eyes and shrank back into the lesser but more familiar realm of what they already believed they knew. They glimpsed him, but then they let him go. They couldn't tolerate upsetting their preconceptions. Our chance is to learn from them. Our chance is to be astonished, to see the wonder and the healing, to grasp the wisdom, and to embrace them rather than run from them. In many ways the greatest gift of the gospel is to show us the sad story of those who could not bring themselves to fully open themselves to the fullness of what Jesus offered and to beg of us that we do it differently. For the knowing that becomes unknowing keeps us in the land of deep darkness, but the knowing that understands its unknowing leads us to where we may see a great light. Thanks be to God. Amen.