

“Traveling Lightly”
Psalm 48; Mark 6:1-13

Almost exactly 30 years ago today, I graduated from seminary, and to tell you the truth, my extended family still does not know what to do with that information. When I graduated, women ministers were rare. In addition, we were not a religious family. We were those kids who were dropped off, but whose parents weren't involved. My family had ideas of what a minister was, and I didn't fit the picture. It didn't help that I was the baby of the cousins, and I was a girl, and everyone used to have to watch out for me. They just couldn't picture me in the role of pastor. My aunt told me I'd never stick with it. They are still not comfortable with my role. When someone in the family is seriously ill, they don't tell me until afterwards, because they don't want to upset me. What do they think I do for a living?

In our scripture today, Jesus returns home after the beginning of his ministry in Galilee. He has only been away from home for a short time, but surely word of miraculous things has filtered back. But the people of Nazareth reject him, so he leaves, and sends out the twelve. This is another of those two part scripture stories such as we studied last week. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus has performed four miracles in three days. He calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee. He cast out demons from a man. As he was walking to heal a sick child, a hemorrhaging woman touched the hem of his garment and was instantly healed. Finally, when he reaches the sick child, she is dead, and he raises her up to new life. It is after these spectacular days that Jesus heads to his hometown and our scripture takes place.

Today, I want us to think about this scripture, and I want us to examine ways in which we identify with the various people in the story. First we will compare ourselves to Jesus, who was rejected after going home. Next, we will look at the townspeople who hear good news and then turn away. Finally, we will look at the disciples sent out to towns and villages to teach and heal.

First of all, let us look at the main character in the scripture account – Jesus. Can we identify ourselves with him in the story? Although on the surface we may have experienced going back home, I think that the answer has to be, “No, we can't.” We may have experienced coming home again after leaving, and the family treats us as if we haven't changed, but that's as far as it goes. Can we relate to what it was like for the Son of God to be rejected in his own home town? I don't think we can.

The problem is that the townspeople of Nazareth thought they could identify with Jesus. They thought they knew everything about him—son of Mary; carpenter; knew his brothers and sisters. This was a man who they thought they knew, and they could not reconcile their knowledge with the things they saw and heard about him. They were too familiar with him. They couldn't believe this Jesus was God's chosen one, the Messiah. Interestingly, in the early church, the

problem was not in believing that Jesus was God. The Greek speaking Christians had a harder time believing that God would take on a lowly human form. But to the people of Nazareth, it was all too clear that he was in a lowly human form. They had seen him grow up, and they couldn't accept his divinity.

One theological way of putting this is the difference between intimacy and familiarity. We want to feel close to Jesus. We want to feel loved by Jesus, and we are! We have an intimacy with Jesus as adopted brothers and sisters, as God's own children, and as heirs with Christ. But that intimacy must be combined with a sense of humility, and gratitude, and awe. We recognize the undeserved gift of grace that brings us into God's family. We have an intimacy with God because of God's redeeming love and sacrifice for us.

The movie "Dogma," starring Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, is a dark religious comedy. In it, an archbishop from a church in New Jersey decides that the image of Jesus suffering on the cross is too hard to sell in today's market. He rejects that serious, solemn Jesus for a new image he calls "Buddy Christ." He has a statue built of a softer, more cartoonish image of Jesus with a big smile, and a wink, and a thumbs up. The new statue is hugely popular. As the movie continues, however, we find that it was Satan behind this new image. He wanted to take away the sacred and just leave the "Buddy" Jesus behind.

Remember those W.W.J.D. bracelets that were so popular? I liked them for what they were—an ethical reminder to stop and think before you act. Many theologians, however, despised them, saying they were too familiar. There was no way to know the answer to that question, "What would Jesus do?"

This same fear of too much familiarity is why you won't find some favorite hymns in our Presbyterian hymnal. Take for example, the much loved hymn, "In the Garden."

*"I come to the garden alone, when the dew is still on the roses.....
And he walks with me, and he talks with me,
And he tells me I am his own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known."*

Even though hymns like these are much loved, the theological message is one that only recognizes the humanity of Jesus. It was familiarity with only that human side of Jesus that causes those in his hometown to reject him. Our intimacy with Jesus must be tempered with awe, humility, praise and thanksgiving for the grace of the risen Christ.

So, if it is not Jesus in the story who we identify with, what about the towns people? We've already warned of the difference between familiarity and intimacy. Are there temptations to other similarities between us? Let's look at what occurs in the scripture. Surely word has come of the miracles Jesus has done in the preceding 3 days. Jesus comes on the Sabbath day, as the people gather to worship, and he teaches them. The gospel writer Mark says they were "astounded." They asked, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom

that has been given to him?” They exclaim in wonder, “What deeds of power are being done by his hands!” It sounds at first as if they are hearing the gospel and accepting it.

But then, as they started to think about it, the gospel says they “took offence.” The Greek word actually says they “stumbled.” The wonder and majesty of his words and actions took hold of their hearts, but then they encountered a stumbling block that made them fall away. For them, it was familiarity. The humanity of the person they knew caused them to stumble. They were religious people on the Sabbath, there to hear God’s word—and they almost get it—but then they stumble. Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor says this passage reminds her of holding a match to a bunch of wet sticks. At first there is a flame, but it won’t take hold because the sticks won’t let it. They are religious people asked to change—but their religion gets in the way.

What are some of our stumbling blocks? What can keep us from catching fire for our faith? I think some can be theological social issues. 150 years ago we were divided as a denomination over the issue of slavery. 85 years ago Presbyterians began ordaining women, and still there is discontent. A fairly new splinter group has started called the Evangelical Presbyterian Church which has the goal of taking churches out of our denomination over disagreements about property rights and the ordination of women. They are targeting certain presbyteries, one of which is the Presbytery of Western North Carolina. Last week marked the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall riots which marked the start of the modern civil rights movement for gays and lesbians, and their equal rights are still a stumbling block for many in our denomination. We have many things we stumble over, such as how we look at and deal with the presence of other religions around the world. Some people say, why worry about other religions when we Christians have so many factions and so much dissent and fighting among ourselves? We stumble over so many issues within the Christian faith instead of focusing on the central gospel message that binds us together.

But perhaps the biggest stumbling block for most American Christians is not these hot button social issues. I think our biggest stumbling block is the apathy of affluence. We are too comfortable. We have it too easy. Why would we want to live the radical faith that Jesus calls us to live? We feel the heat of the flame, and at moments we are ready to catch on fire. At moments we become the faithful followers we should be, and for that God is grateful. But it is too easy to fall back, to be like the townspeople and turn away. We forget to be astounded, and we stumble in our reaction to the gospel.

Finally, what about the second half of the scripture where Jesus leaves Nazareth and sends out the disciples in pairs into the surrounding villages to teach and heal? You probably can’t believe this sermon has gone on this long, and we are only halfway through the story! Well, the disciples are actually the people in the story I think we are most called to identify with. They are not perfect in their understanding. They haven’t been with Jesus all that long. They aren’t very

strong in their faith and understanding. Just a few days before, when Jesus calmed the storm, he chastises them for their lack of faith. But still, Jesus sends them out to proclaim what they have seen and heard.

In the Great Commission, Jesus orders us to “Go and make disciples of all nations.” It sounds like a terrifying task, asking us to go from here today and spread the word. Part of us wants to ignore this part of the story and just keep our mouths shut. But there are some elements in this story which can comfort us as we face this task of sharing the gospel. For one thing, Jesus sends them out in pairs. The task is not up to just one person. Many different people in different places, and going in different directions are taking up the task to make sure the good news is spread. Now, that doesn’t give you an excuse not to join them, and leave all the talking to them. It does, however give you a reassurance that spreading God’s message of love and reconciliation is not all up to you.

The gospel story also reminds us that we do not need to take a lot with us when we begin this task. God uses imperfect messengers, and still asks them to share what they have seen, and heard, and experienced. To the 12 disciples he says not to take extra shoes, or money or cloaks. In The Message, a Bible paraphrase by Eugene Peterson, he renders verses 8 and 9 this way: “Don’t think you need a lot of equipment for this. You are the equipment.”

The passage also reminds us that we will have people who will reject what we are trying to say. Are we willing to put up with those rejections and dangers along with the joys of sharing the gospel? We are called to have the courage to do so. That word “evangelism” seems to terrify us Presbyterians, but it doesn’t need to. One pastor described it this way. “Evangelism is sharing the good news in word and deed, and making sure one doesn’t get in the way of the other.” Listen to that quotation again: “Evangelism is sharing the good news in word and deed, and making sure one doesn’t get in the way of the other.

In addition, we can be assured that the authority and power to share the gospel is given to us by God. Our success does not rely just on us and our good intentions. As youth leader Jerry Goebel says, “We ask God to make instruments of our lives, and we ask God’s fingers to play the tune.”

Jesus returns home to Nazareth after 3 days of teaching, healing and miracles and is rejected by his own people. Their knowledge of him is too familiar and in that familiarity they cannot accept who he is. Our relationship is meant to be one of the closeness of intimacy. We are children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ who have a clear understanding of the awe, gratitude, praise, humility and thanksgiving we owe to our God.

Like the townspeople, we can hear the good news and initially be astounded by it. But we must be careful not to let stumbling blocks trip us up on our way. We must not stumble, whether it is social issues, or interfaith squabbles, or just as likely, our comfort and affluence that make us indifferent to the life the good news calls us to live.

Finally, we need to work to put all of that comfort and affluence aside and be willing to go out in ones and twos. We need to travel lightly, with just who we are and what we have. We must use our words and our deeds to tell the good news of the gospel so that all the world can be transformed through the love and grace of our Lord and God.

Barbara Stoop
Westminster Presbyterian Church
July 5, 2009