

Got Any Thoughts on the Matter?
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Scriptures:

Mark 6:1--13 (NRSV)

¹He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

The Mission of the Twelve

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If 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." ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Sermon:

Our texts this morning pick up where we left off last Sunday. Jesus has finished his preaching and teaching tour of Galilee and has returned to his hometown of Nazareth, at the time a community estimated to be between 1400 to 1800 people.

On the Sabbath, Jesus and his disciples go to a synagogue. Shaye J. D. Cohen, the modern Jewish historian and cultural expert, tells us that at the time synagogues in the lands of Israel, as opposed to those in the Diaspora, would have been more community, social-center-school like facilities than places specifically for prayer and worship¹. This would all change after 70 C.E. and the destruction of the Temple and with the rise of what becomes known as rabbinical Judaism.

Therefore, a gathering of men for the study and discussion of Torah on the Sabbath would have been common. Jesus, as a male member of the community, would have been free to join in such studies and discussions, within limits.

However, Jesus' contributions, if they were like his earlier discourses at Capernaum, would not have been like any lay-person's or even a scribe's, the legal experts in the Law. Jesus spoke with authority; that is, he spoke as one having the authority of a rabbi. Rabbis could introduce new interpretations or make legal judgments on Torah; scribes and the laity could not and if they

¹ Cohen, Shaye J. D. From the Maccabees to the Mishnah, 3rd edition. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2014, p.112-113.

did it would have been scandalous.² Since Jesus was a lowly craftsman and had not studied under a rabbi that anyone knew, he was way out of line. Therefore, let us see Jesus today as a small-town boy stepping way outside the social expectations and tolerances for someone in the small world of Nazareth.

In Mark's Gospel, we do not know what Jesus' discourse was about, only that he and his insights and ideas severely offended and greatly confounded those gathered.

I remind us that in the Ancient Mediterranean world, one's honor standing, the arena of men, would have been fixed and limited like any of life's other resources. So, for someone to claim for himself or even to have others ascribed a greater social status than what would have been accorded within the community would come at the expense of other men's honor ranking and social authority, thereby disrupting community stability. However, one of the ways a person could legitimately increase their honor standing was by doing things for the greater good of the community, an opportunity that Jesus would be denied. So, Jesus' violations of social expectations play a critical role in our passages this morning, but, also, often puts him on a collision course with his religious establishment.

As I said, whatever Jesus' opinion was on whatever shocked and offended those gathered, prompted them to say, "Can you believe this guy, where does he get such knowledge and how does he do the things we've heard about? He couldn't have gotten this stuff from anyone here in Nazareth that's for sure. And, besides who does he think he is; isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary? What do carpenters know about Torah, except what they have been told and taught by their fathers and the elders?"

Therefore, the wisdom or knowledge of Jesus and his power to do amazing things, since he didn't get it from growing up in Nazareth, had to come from someone or from somewhere else. This carries the implications that magic or demonic forces were at work. To contradict such notions in Mark's Gospel, we see very clearly that it is a person's faith in God's ability and willingness to heal that is the critical part in their healing and social restorations, except in the cases of demonic possession and exorcisms. In the cases of demonic possession, Jesus as an anointed, holy man of God has the authority and can and did command the demons. However, we learned earlier in Mark 3:20-25 that Jesus had already been accused of casting out lesser demons because he was possessed by one of the boss demons, Beelzebub. Jesus easily refuted this challenge to his authority.

Some of the earliest manuscripts of our passages today refer to Jesus as the son of Joseph, the Carpenter, not the son of Mary. Also, a carpenter is best understood simply as a craftsman in either wood or stone (*tektōn*). Jesus being described as the son of Mary has been understood in some quarters as either a veiled reference by a later editor to the virgin birth, since Mark has no birth narrative, or as an insult by those in the synagogue directed at Mary and Jesus, given the rumors that surrounded his conception. If this were the case, Jesus was being alluded to as a *mamzer*, or someone born of a forbidden relationship and his mother a shameless woman.

I, however, believe that the reference to Jesus as the son of Mary is nothing more than Jesus' hometown folks referring to him as a particular craftsman by his living family of reference. Joseph the Carpenter was never a part of Mark's story, probably because he was deceased.

There is also an additional level of disparagement at work here. Many craftsmen would have been itinerants, going from town to town and building site to building site. Therefore, such itinerant craftsmen would have been viewed with a jaundiced eye because they were not always

² Stern, David H.. Jewish New Testament Commentary (Kindle Locations 2862-2867). Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc. Kindle Edition.

around to protect their families and to guard the family's honor. We see this kind of thinking about traveling salesmen at times.

Joseph, Jesus, and his brothers may have all worked away from home at times in Sepphoris, one of the largest employers of tradesmen in the area and only four to five miles from Nazareth. Speculations are that Sepphoris was still being rebuilt, expanded, and repopulated as a Greco-Roman city after it had been destroyed in 6 C.E. and many of its inhabitants sold into slavery. We could see the destruction of Sepphoris in 6 C.E. as a sort of coming-out party for what became known as the Zealot movement under the leadership of Judas of Galilee and a Pharisee named Zadok. Thus, Jesus being from Nazareth in Galilee and near Sepphoris would have influenced how people saw him and his mission at times. Another story.

Anyway, Jesus has upset those in the synagogue and they, in return, have challenged and insulted his honor. Jesus, in the proper and expected Ancient Near Eastern male response to an honor challenge, one-ups them with an even greater insult.

⁴Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets [someone sent by God to proclaim God's will for God's people] are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

So, Jesus identifies himself as a prophet, and in my words, says, "You folks are fools, worse than unbelievers. You are so dense and blinded by your sense of normalcy, traditions, and community stability, you wouldn't recognize a prophet from God if he bit you in the leg."

After these exchanges, we get a sense that as those in the synagogue had rejected Jesus as a prophet, Jesus now turns his back on them. He could heal only a few people in Nazareth, probably those who didn't know him or his family, and then he leaves and goes out among the villages. Henceforth, Capernaum will become his base of operation. He called his disciples to him and sent them out two-by-two across the Galilean country side into other villages.

¹⁰He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, [a house understood as the home of a family or an extended family, which often made up an entire village] stay there until you leave the place. [don't be jumping from house to house in search of better accommodations or food.] ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, [that is, if people refuse to accept and listen to you like the people of Nazareth] as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." [This shaking off the dust of a village would have been an insult and testimony to the dishonor of the village and its people.]

Jesus extends to his disciples the power to exorcise demons and to cure their influences in people's lives. He instructs them to be efficient and forthright in calling people to repent like John the Baptist. The people are to turn from their false assurances as Jews and their laxness in observing God's will and ways because the Kingdom of God, as evidenced by Jesus' and the disciples' power over the demonic, indicate that the kingdom is very near and coming soon. God's kingdom will not only bring relief and blessings for the non-elites and the very poor of the land, but it will bring divine judgment upon those and their supporters, who distort the word of God and misuse their positions to extort, victimize, and disenfranchise the people of God.

Jesus shows that the kingdom's coming is so imminent that time is of the essence, so the disciples are not to burden themselves with extra clothes, shoes, money, or even worry about the need for money. In short, the disciples are to trust their creature comforts, provisioning, and sheltering to the Mediterranean world's concept of hospitality, which was considered a divine obligation.

It is obvious that Jesus' community and its leaders did not have very high expectations of themselves, their children, or God beyond their staid normalcy and traditions. The lack of faith that God could and would work amazing things in and through one of their own prevented many people from being healed of their diseases and fully restored to families and communities. Isn't it sad to think that such closed-mindedness stifled God's blessings in Jesus' village, as it often does in our day and time?

So, as modern Jesus-people, let us not be too quick to condemn those in Jesus' hometown. We too, have been known to narrowly define who and what is acceptable in our religious lives in service of social stability and normalcy. Sometimes this makes it almost impossible for God's Spirit to lead us into new revelations, relationships, or to restore broken relationships, not to mention see new kingdom opportunities. Thus, the price many Christians and their communities of faith pay for social stability - the status quo - is that they can't see the possibilities of God working in their life or the life of their churches.

Is it any wonder that Western, post-industrial Christianity's contributions to the Kingdom of God is waning, and we just seem to be recycling old revelations in novel ways with new and different rhetoric? Therefore, it is not surprising that many modern, western, post-industrial Christians don't receive the fullest measure of God's blessings in their lives, and why our communities of faith are in such decline.

Our excuses for this decline are the changing lifestyles of different generations, generations that have been led astray by TV, technology, and their moral and social development abandoned by career-minded parents. We say its capitalism, individualism, liberalism, globalism, socialism etc. run amuck. Honestly, I don't think such things are the causes of a diminishing Christianity, but its symptoms. Furthermore, in an attempt to reach the masses we dumb-down scripture and its message to little more than feel-good, politically correct morality stories in the vernacular. Thus, Christians can't possibly understand the breadth of God's revelations in Jesus and the hopes and realities of the coming kingdom of God for the world.

Folks, the human spirit and God's spirit have not changed from day one. Some of the earliest records of human existence indicate that survival needs, creature comforts, and procreation, as important as they are, were never seen as the ultimate purposes of human existence. The human spirit has always understood that its definitive purpose lay in a relationship with that which it understood to be beyond this world and life as its Creator/Sustainer. It also appears that humankind across the ages has held the idea that the meanings for good or ill that we give our lives will not be lost in death.

The presence of God that resonated with the human spirit in the beginning still resonates with the human spirit today. Furthermore, I think participation in this spiritual awareness is more critical today than ever before, if for no other reason than the fact that we currently have the potential to destroy all life as we know it on this planet.

Truth is: the reason why the Kingdom of God in the Western industrial and post-industrial world is not growing and its moral and spiritual influences are no longer the norm is that most Western Christians do not really understand who and what Jesus was and is, nor do they really believe in the divine authority of his teachings.

Too frequently, Western Christians worship Lord Stability and his pet demons Consistency, the Familiar, Tradition, and Cost-effectiveness, while hoping for some supernatural take-over by Christ not only in their personal lives but in the world. Many Western Christians want God to send Jesus like some holy storm trooper to do for them what they have the power to do for themselves with God's help but are unwilling to buck Lord Stability and his minions in the process. Thus, I feel confident in saying that many Christians in this nation, like those folks in Jesus' community,

do not expect anything great to happen among them and by the power of Lord Stability, they are not disappointed.

Jesus marveled at such lack of faith in God, and I think the lack of a spiritual ambition. To compensate for the failure of his village, Jesus goes to other villages and prepares and instructs his disciples to go to yet other villages, homes, and families to proclaim the Good News - the kingdom is coming, justice, peace, and wholeness is on the horizon. As proof of this Good News, Jesus and his disciples exercised power over unclean spirits of this world seen as the sources of sickness, disease, injustice, and brokenness in the ancient world.

In closing, let me say again, that in Mark's Gospel, people's faith is crucial to their healings and restorations to their families, friends, and communities. However, I fear that the faith of many Western Christians today does not extend much beyond their hopes of a positive after life, not in moving mountains or healing the diseases and illnesses, physical and social, of this world for the benefit of all.

I believe that God's power is just as available to people of faith today as it was in Jesus' day. I believe that God is still calling and commissioning people to go out and confront demonic influences and corruption. The understandings of the means and mediums of healing and wholeness may have changed in the modern world, but God in the Christ has not.

Christians, let us not restrict God's possibilities in our lives or in the life of our communities of faith like the folks in Jesus' hometown did to our detriment. Let us imagine and expect great things, work for great things, and God will bless those efforts rightly understood and done in the name of Jesus. And, just for your information, Christianity and the Gospel are growing among those other villages; such as Central and South America, Africa, and parts of Asia. These people are eager and some are literally dying to hear and receive God's word in the Christ. Christianity is waning only in the western nations of Europe, Canada, and the United States.³ Wonder why? Got any insights or thoughts on this matter?

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