

Proper 9B 2021 Sermon

Mark 6:1-13

Jesus came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On 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! Is 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. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He 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. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 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." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Jesus returns to his home town of Nazareth, where the people know him as "the carpenter," since that was his occupation during all those years he lived among them in Nazareth. Now, carpenters in those days were fairly low in the rather rigid social class hierarchy. And yet, here was Jesus, the carpenter, *teaching* in the synagogue – as if he were an educated Pharisee or rabbi or prophet! Who did he think he was? "He should be making tables, not speaking wisdom, curing the sick, and casting out demons."¹ The hometown folk ask themselves, "Is 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 on the surface, the people of Nazareth were right. Jesus *was* a carpenter. He *was* the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon; and his sisters were still living there in Nazareth. All of these facts about Jesus were true – as far as they went.

But it seems that that's where it stopped: with what townspeople had observed on the surface of things. But there is far more to Jesus – far more to **any** of us, for that matter – there is far more than what people see on the surface. Our true selves run much deeper than the demographic and descriptive facts about us. If ours were a world in which anyone who cooks is just a cook, and anyone who sings is just a singer, then we would be a relationally and spiritually impoverished people, indeed. For there would be nothing to distinguish *this* cook from *that*

cook, or *that* singer from *this* singer. Their unique personalities and gifts and potentials, their struggles, their successes and failures, their fears and passions, their relationships – both with one another and with God – would be missed entirely if a cook were just a cook and a singer just a singer. As psychologist James Finlay notes, “Who we are in [God] is in no way reducible to our everyday, ordinary self.”² Who we are in God is in no way reducible to our everyday, ordinary self.

In the eyes of his hometown people, Jesus was “the carpenter,” a son of Mary and brother to many siblings, all of whom the townspeople knew. But it seems that’s all they saw in him. They refused to entertain the possibility that there might be far more below the familiar surface of Jesus than they could possibly imagine. And their refusal to be open and receptive to this possibility meant that Jesus “could do no deed of power there...”

Now, we know from *last* week’s Gospel (Mark 5:21-43) that redemptive power resided in Jesus, always ready to freely flow out into anyone open to receiving it – like the woman with the chronic bleeding who only had to touch Jesus’ garment and the healing power flowed strongly into her. But if openness and faith allowed the flow of divine grace to go forth from Jesus, the opposite was also true: closed and unreceptive hearts could **keep** that flow of divine love and healing grace from pouring out from him. And I believe that’s what divine love, grace, and healing *always* are: a **flow**. Jesus *wanted* that flow of divine life to pour forth from himself into others; but he found the townspeople of Nazareth unwilling to be receivers and channels of that divine flow.

And do we not, at times, do the same? Unconsciously stop that flow of divine life from pouring out from other people into, and through, us? Do we not, at times, refuse to entertain the possibility that God could ever do great things through some “ordinary” friend or family member who we’ve known our whole lives? Yet, just because we know some facts and history about our friends and family members doesn’t mean we are seeing beneath the surface to the image of God in them; doesn’t mean that we are open to the possibility that transformative love might, at any moment, flow out from them, touching us and healing the world. One theologian writes, “The fact is that we... have an awful time truly listening to and seeing God at work in those whom we *think* we know well...”³ and a pastor reminds us, “this God we serve has a history of accomplishing unconventional things through unconventional, unlikely, unexpected servants.”⁴ We see it throughout the Bible: Abraham the liar, Moses the murderer, David the adulterer, Mary the teenage mother, Peter the denier of Jesus, Paul the persecutor of Christians. God used them all as instruments of his grace, channels of his healing love.

Yes, we pronounce in our baptismal vows that we will “seek and serve Christ in all persons;” but how many of us consciously, deliberately do so? How many of us intentionally try to see, and be open and receptive to, that flow of divine life

waiting to gush forth from the depths of that person we have known superficially our whole lives? Do we even *believe* that there could possibly **be** what Jesus calls “living water” in the depths of that familiar person, waiting to flow forth from them and quench our thirst and that of others? (John 4:14)

On March 18, 1958, Trappist monk Thomas Merton was standing at a street corner in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. It was an ordinary day and ordinary people were going about their business. But as he looked at them they suddenly changed. He later wrote, “I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved these people... I saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. To me, they seemed to be walking around shining like the sun.”⁵ Merton went on to wonder what the world would be like if we could all see each other as we really are, in God.

Now, you might be thinking, “Yeah, but that was Thomas Merton, and I’m a nobody.” But why could you or I not see what he saw? We have already noted that “this God we serve has a history of accomplishing unconventional things through unconventional, unlikely, unexpected servants.” And that includes ourselves. Do we recognize that the divine flow of love and grace is within **us**, ready to flow out to others, helping to heal the world? Or do we think that only extraordinary saints like Thomas Merton are capable of channeling the flow of God’s love and power?

Author (and former presidential candidate) Marianne Williamson wrote: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant [and wonderful]?’ Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world... We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. [And it’s] not just in *some* of us; it’s in **everyone**. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”⁶

After all, look at what God accomplishes through Jesus’ disciples in the *second* half of today’s Gospel. **They** did just what *Jesus* did: “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” And these disciples were but ordinary fishermen and tax collectors! Or were they more than that?

Our Gospel today calls us to look beneath surface appearances and labels and assumptions; to go deeper in ourselves and in how we see others. Richard Rohr speaks to this matter of “going deeper” in ourselves and others when he speaks about the difference between what is sacred and what is profane. “It’s not that the sacred is here and the profane is over there,” Fr. Rohr writes. “Everything is profane if you live on the surface of it, and everything is sacred if you go into the depths of it—even your sin. To go inside your own mistakenness is to find God.

[And to] stay on the *surface* of very **good** things, like Bible, sacrament, ...or church, is to often do very unkind and evil things, while *calling* them good.”⁷

My friends, it’s easy for us to criticize and demonize people when we are only dealing with them on the surface level – the level of labeling, categorizing, gossiping, presuming, judging. It is much harder to criticize and demonize people if we are seeing who they are beneath their surface appearances and behaviors – who they are in God.

“So the division for the Christian,” Fr. Rohr continues, “is not between secular and sacred things, but between superficial things and things at their depth. The depths always reveal grace, while staying on the surface [like the townspeople of Nazareth in our Gospel] allows one to largely miss the point.”⁸

Episcopal monk Curtis Almquist suggests a way we might start to practice seeing life – and other people – beneath the surface, going deeper. He writes: “One of the words which we Brothers use very frequently is ‘invitation...’ [W]e’re always asking ourselves, ‘So what’s the invitation here?’ Believing that life by nature is an invitation and it’s **God’s** invitation to participate in life, in God’s life.

“It may be you’re passing by people on the street, you’re walking or you’re on a bus or a subway, you’re in commuter traffic, and you’re seeing people sitting beside you or seeing people through car windows. What are you seeing? Can you pray a blessing on them? Can you radiate God’s light and life and love onto their being? We’re on this perpetual mission field in which God is with us always, and we would not want to miss a moment of life.”⁹

Where is the invitation, *now*, to go deeper in life and in love of God and neighbor?

AMEN

1 John Shea,

2 from Richard Rohr’s daily meditation, “Being Human,” Tuesday, February 21, 2017 <https://cac.org/being-human-2017-02-21/>

3 George C. Heider, “Prophets at home: Mark 6:1-13,” *The Christian Century*, June 29, 2009

4 Douglass Key, *The Christian Century*, June 25, 2012

5 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, cited in Goodreads, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/2464342-in-louisville-at-the-corner-of-fourth-and-walnut-in>

6. [Marianne Williamson](#), *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of “A Course in Miracles”*

7 cited here: <https://danutm.wordpress.com/2013/05/26/richard-ronr-trinity-sunday-surface-versus-depth/>

8 Rohr, *ibid.*

9 <https://www.ssje.org/2014/03/19/love-life-identity/>