

“God’s Limitations”

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 5, 2015

2 Corinthians 12:2-10 ~ Mark 6:1-13

Our children grow up awfully fast don’t they? One minute they are sitting on our laps, and they think we are the smartest people in the world. The next thing we know...in their eyes... we don’t know anything. How did this happen? Luckily this stage passes away as well, and they begin to think that we *might* know a few things after all. I’m feeling particularly sentimental because our daughter Mary Cate will be married soon, and shortly thereafter she will be a mother. I’m thrilled for her and I’m more than a little nervous for her too. It’s hard for us to let our children grow up, you know? We limit them by our own limitations. Or we fail to believe in them so they can’t believe in themselves. Or we hold their earlier mistakes and immaturities against them.

We do it to each other, too. We limit each other by refusing to forgive. We limit each other by failing to expect the best. We limit each other by refusing to allow people to grow or change or be more than we are. That’s why people often have to escape their families ... their hometown ... their home church ... all their familiar circles ... so they can get past their past and become who they really are.

We have this power over each other ... to make people more ... or to make them less ... by our interactions. We need others to imagine what we might yet become ... to encourage our best gifts ... to believe in us so that we can push the limits of our abilities to their utmost. Yet so often what we do to each other is just the opposite. We discourage with our negativity. We restrict with our low expectations. We limit people by the judgments that we’ve already formed about them ... and levy a life sentence against anyone who has disappointed us. As if people couldn’t change. And, we internalize those negative messages so that we limit ourselves in the same way. We are so filled with “I can’t’s.” But most of them are really “I won’t’s.” We escape responsibility for our lack of will with the excuse of our inability. That way we don’t even have to try.

According to Mark’s story, Jesus had already healed a man with an unclean spirit in Capernaum. He healed a leper there, too ... then he crisscrossed Galilee working one wonder after another in every village and town. Remember our scripture from last week ... he even raised a little girl from the dead. Everyone was amazed by his teachings and his healings. But when Jesus came to Nazareth, his own hometown, they said, “Who does he think he is?” They said, “Where did he 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?” (Mark 6:3). Mark says that, “They took offense at him.” Mark says that, “He could do no deed of power there.” Mark says that, “He was amazed at their unbelief.”

Jesus said, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” So I suppose it may have been a case of Nazareth not being able to let one of their own children grow up and realize his full potential. Jesus would always be a child to

them. Or maybe it was that common human jealousy towards a hometown boy who made good and built a reputation bigger than their village ... or their children.

But Mark thinks it was even deeper than that. They weren't just limiting Jesus. They were limiting God. Writes Susan Fleming McGurgan:

This passage reminds us that God shares the Gospel with us every day, even when we are too afraid to hear it. It reminds us that God longs to heal us, even when we are too stubborn to know we are broken. It reminds us that God will send us messengers, even when we are too blind to see them clearly.

Long before Jesus, the prophets of Israel wrestled with the hardheartedness and hardheadedness of God's own people. The people refused to respond to the word of God that the prophets heard so sharply. They refused to perceive the approaching disaster that the prophets saw so clearly. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel – all of them spoke of it. It mystified them. Why wouldn't God's own people hear the Word of God? Mark's story of prophet Jesus tells the tale. His own people couldn't believe in him because he was one of them. They couldn't believe anything so good could come out of Nazareth. They knew their own limitations ... their faults, their failures, their weaknesses, their compromises, their own lack of faith ... so they projected them upon Jesus. They projected them upon God. Don't you see the irony? They couldn't believe in God ... because they couldn't believe in themselves!

It's a strange story. Jesus comes to his hometown where you think he would be welcomed as a hero. But he is criticized. He is resisted. He is limited. Here is God incarnate, whom the psalmist describes as "the mighty one, God the Lord, (who) speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting..." before (whom) is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around... (who) calls to the heavens above and to the earth below, that he may judge his people... (who owns) the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalm 50). And they would speak of this God's limitations?

But yes, apparently so. Long ago the rabbis observed that God created the world by withdrawing God's self just far enough for us to exist. The resulting paradox is that God is present everywhere, except that space where God gives us the freedom to choose for ourselves. God respects the boundaries of human freedom and will not force grace and goodness upon us. Says Kirk Kubicek: "Just put your hand at arms length in front of your face for a moment. There. That is how close the reign of God really is." All that power. All that strength. All that love. That close. All you have to do is invite God into your space. But most of us say, "No. Stay there at arm's length. Talk to the hand." We push God out and create our own little hell.

After all, who would we think of *today* as Jesus' hometown crowd ... as his own people? Well, maybe, that would be us, the church? Does it ever happen, that at least sometimes, we are those who are blind to God's presence ... that we are indifferent to God's power? Is it even remotely possible that we ... who think we know Jesus best ... may at times honor him least?

In her book, "Nickle and Dimed" about the working poor in America, Barbara Ehrenreich writes about going to a tent revival meeting in Portland, Maine. The preacher's theme was 'Jesus on the cross' and the importance of believing in him in order to go to heaven. As she listened to him Ehrenreich looked around at the mostly impoverished audience and she thought:

“It would be nice if someone would read this sad-eyed crowd the Sermon on the Mount, accompanied by a rousing commentary on income inequality and the need for a hike in the minimum wage. But Jesus makes his appearance here only as a corpse; the living man, the wine-guzzling vagrant and precocious socialist, is never once mentioned, nor anything he ever had to say. Christ crucified rules, and it may be that the true business of modern Christianity is to crucify him again and again so that he can never get a word out of his mouth.”

She concludes: “I get up to leave, timing my exit for when the preacher’s metronomic head movements have him looking the other way, and walk out to search for my car, half expecting to find Jesus out there in the dark, gagged and tethered to a tent pole.”

Her words remind me of those of Frederick Buechner, who wrote in his spiritual autobiography "Now and Then," about his off-the-beaten-path (at least for a seminary-trained, ordained Presbyterian minister) encounter with Agnes Sanford, a Christian healer. "The most vivid image she presented," writes Buechner, "was of Jesus standing in church services all over Christendom with his hands tied behind his back, unable to do any mighty works because the ministers who led the services either didn't expect him to do them or didn't dare ask him to do them . . ."

Those images haunt me ... Jesus tethered to a tent pole ... and Jesus standing in the church, his hands tied behind his back. Is it possible that we in the church, Jesus' latter-day hometown crowd, are sometimes the least likely to call upon him ... the last to turn to him ... less likely than many others to be open to his power and promise, his mystery and his grace?

Which is to say, we can put limitations on God. We can reduce God to the size of our own confidence and courage and imagination. Why, listen a while and you can actually see the vast, immeasurable God getting smaller and smaller. “We’ve never done it that way before.” “We tried that once and it didn’t work.” “The experts say it can’t be done.” “The future can’t be any better than the past.” “We’re too small.” “We’re too poor.” “We’re too weak.” Before long the almighty God has been reduced to a warm fuzzy feeling ... a God who makes no demands and issues no challenges and creates a church which has no voice, no vision, and no power. This puny God is easy to control but is also essentially useless. We might as well sleep in on Sunday or go to the lake ... there’s really no pressing reason to worship this “teeny-weenie” God of our puny faith. And when such “teeny-weenie” churches die, their epitaph doesn’t say “Christ did great things among them, amazing signs and wonders pointing to the love of a majestic God.” It says: “He could do no deed of power there.... And he was amazed at their unbelief.”

Imagine instead that God who visited the other towns through Christ ... where people were open and receptive to the word ... where the sick and afflicted ... the poor and the outcast ... the possessed and addicted were desperate enough to accept healing ... where people had the imagination and the courage and the will to attempt great things for a great God. That was the God who turned the world upside down with good news. That was the God who built hospitals and ended slavery and fought for civil rights and faced down dictators and reconciled enemies and raised the dead. That was the God who founded a church set on battering down the gates of hell. That was the God who built this very church so many years ago. And that’s the unlimited God we need to believe in now ... to invite into our midst ... to hear, and to follow.

Sure we’re small and we’re weak. But God isn’t. And I say ... even if you don’t believe in yourself ... believe in the God who is among you. That God can do great things through you. That God can overcome your addictions ... heal your wounds ... help you forgive ... renew your

spirit ... fill you with courage ... give you abilities that you never knew you had. That God can turn your "I can't" and your "I won't" into "Let's do it together." That God will amaze you. Beloved, take heart ... take into your heart the one who loved you so much he laid down his life to show you how to truly live ... believe in the one who believed in you that much ... take hold of the God who would take hold of you ... and let go of all your excuses. If you do, great things will happen. ...wonders beyond your wildest dreams. And you will do them because Christ will do them through you. Amen.

May we pray? O Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. Come among us and teach us. Live among us and lead us. Work your wonders again. And we will be your people, and you will be our God. Amen.