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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

July 5, 2015

“Mary’s Boy”

(Mark 6:1-6)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son?” He could not do any miracles there. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.” (Mk. 6).

COLLECT: O God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy. Grant us the fullness of Your grace that we may be called to repentance and made partakers of Your heavenly treasures; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

My brothers and I learned how to play golf at Delbrook Golf Course in Delavan. It's not a difficult course, except for the first hole, and what made that hole difficult was the guy behind us. You see, inevitably, there would be players in front of us and we would want to wait for them to clear out before teeing off. It's not polite to drive into people. For me, once I saw the folks ahead were beyond that first sand trap on the right hand side, I knew it was safe for me to tee-off, because that was my maximum range.

But there was a starter at Delbrook, an immense, cigar chomping curmudgeon who sat behind us in the shade of the clubhouse. It was his job to let people know when they could go. While I was waiting for the folks ahead to clear out, he'd be back there shouting, "You can't hit it that far. Go ahead and t-off." But I knew I could hit it that far. I spent a lot of time in the sand trap and knew it intimately. And the people in front were getting to know it now too. But what do you do? When you're twelve and some grumpy old guy is telling you to t-off, you t-off.

You know, I never was able to hit a good drive off that first tee box. Off to the left, or off to the right, or dribbled down the middle . . . I lived down to his expectations. Then, during that walk of shame to where that ball lied nearby, I could hear him muttering in the background, complimenting his gift of prophecy.

Something like that is happening in our gospel lesson. Is this not the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's boy? "And he could not do any miracles there."

Jesus has come back to his home town of Nazareth, a small town, perhaps several hundred people, no more than a

thousand. They were his neighbors, his parents, friends, maybe even his aunts, uncles and cousins. They knew him as only hometown folk know their own sons and daughters. They had watched him grow through childhood: watched him playing in the streets, watched him apprentice in his father's trade, they watched as he became a young adult, taking his turn as a reader in the synagogue.

It was whispered around Nazareth that he urged his fanatic cousin, John, to baptize him. And then he disappeared; no one had seen or heard from him since. Some said he had been in the desert, alone, fasting. Others said he had been preaching, and was recruiting a small group of followers. Some were even saying they heard he had healed sick people. Now he's come home, and so there's more than a little curiosity surrounding him. The hometown folk were watching.

On the Sabbath, he did what everyone else did -- he went to synagogue. It was small, intimate, everybody knew everybody else. They took turns reading from the Torah, or the prophets, and the reader would say a few words of interpretation or commentary. And so on the occasion of his return to Nazareth after his mysterious absence, they asked Jesus to do the reading. Luke tells us he read from the prophet Isaiah, a wonderful passage about the coming of the Messiah. "He has sent me to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind." But then he rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, sat down and said, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

It was all a bit much for his neighbors. Their initial curiosity and admiration took a decidedly negative turn. "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary?" And they took offense at him.

And did you notice the impact it had on Jesus? The text simply says, "He could do no miracles there." The people of Nazareth saw no great potential in Jesus. And their refusal to accept anything extraordinary out of him rendered Jesus momentarily unable to do anything for them.

At least for a time, the second person of the Trinity was incapacitated by their unbelief. They didn't see the Messiah standing before them. All they could see was Mary's boy, a carpenter. That was his assigned lot in life; he should be content with that. "He could not do any miracles there" Mark says, "And he was amazed at their lack of faith."

Now let's think about this for a moment. Was he still God's Son? Of course. As God's Son did he still have the power and authority to heal the sick, raise the dead and the like? Absolutely. But because of their unbelief, they were neither asking for nor expecting any miracles from him. Nor was Jesus going to give scoffers signs or evidence to prove his identity. His miracles were gifts to those who would receive them, not proofs or signs for those who refused to believe in him. So Jesus doesn't do much in Nazareth, because their unbelief won't let him. To them he's just Mary's boy, the carpenter.

"He could do no miracles there." It's a disturbing little verse because it means we also have the freedom to reject or limit Jesus with our unbelief. With our doubts and unbelief, we can render him unable to work graciously in our lives.

An example: if you believe that God could never forgive you for something you did, well then, you're probably right. It's not that he couldn't or wouldn't. It's that you won't let him. You're clinging to that sin and saying it is too monstrous, too ugly, too wicked even for Jesus. Your making that sin stronger than Jesus and saying his body and blood in this Supper can't touch it. Your unbelief is rejecting the free full forgiveness he wants to give you.

Another example: there are some who believe Jesus was a good teacher, maybe even a prophet, but they refuse to confess him fully as Lord and Savior. They don't believe him to be Lord and Savior. And so their unbelief, in effect, has turned Jesus, at least for themselves, into just another dead prophet.

To many in Nazareth, he was just a carpenter. . . Mary's boy. To many in the world today, he's just a long deceased teacher, one of many. In both cases, they're not allowing him to be Lord and Savior. Their low appraisal of him have tied his hands.

If we can do that to the Son of God, think of the influence we have over run of the mill people. If we can incapacitate Jesus with our unbelief and low expectations, think of what we can do to regular people. Maybe it's an employee at work who never quite measures up to your standards, or the man who married your daughter, or the woman who teaches your son. If they're never good enough for you . . . if all you do is criticize but never encourage, if they sense you are only their judge, never their advocate or friend, I don't doubt that before long they'll simply stop trying to please you, and may even become what you've made them to be.

If we can do that to adults, think of what we can do to little children. The best teachers in my mind are those who spot a natural ability or talent in a child, and will not let that child forget or neglect that gift. There are teachers who have a way of drawing the best out of children. I've had teachers like that and I suspect you have as well. What a blessing they are.

But if as a child, all you hear from your parents or teacher or coaches is, "You're no good at that; you don't have what it takes." In time, that message will be encoded in your DNA. "I'm not good at that; I don't have what it takes." If a child grows up hearing time and again that he causes nothing but trouble, it won't be long before he accommodates that view and starts living down to that expectation. "You can't hit it that far. Go ahead and t-off."

If we can render Jesus effectively powerless by our low expectations, we can do it to an entire race. Just over 150 years we still had slavery in our country. That system made enormous assumptions about African men and women who were hunted, captured, shipped, and sold. Assumptions were made about their intelligence, their bodies, their souls.

Not too long ago African Americans were prevented from voting, from studying at the best universities, from participating in the best social and cultural institutions. “Those people can’t do it” the dominant culture believed. “They’re genetically coded to fall lower on the bell curve. They’re lethargic or violent.” Can you imagine the cumulative impact of those messages?

Walking back to the car in a big parking lot at night, if there happens to be a woman walking in front of me, sometimes I get the feeling I’m making her nervous. She’ll shuffle a little faster, maybe glance back at me, pull out her cell phone and have it at the ready. I want to say, “Hey lady, I’m just trying to get to my car like you are.” But instead I will slow down or make my car chirp so she knows that’s where I’m heading. I sometimes wonder how nervous that woman would be if I were a big black man walking behind her at night? And what message would her anxiety send to me? “You’re a black man. Chances are you’re dangerous and can’t be trusted.”

If we can do it to Jesus, we can do it even to the entire human race. For well over a century, we’ve been told over and over that as humans, we’re just animals, not too far removed from our primate cousins. I think there are many who, if only sub-consciously, have bought into that. They believe it, and accommodate it and live down to those expectations and assumptions.

This is the time of the year when I like to lie down now and then on a clear night, outside, on the grass, and just spend some time looking at the stars. Psalm 8, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?” Lying on the grass, looking at the stars, the planets, the galaxies, one can feel so small, so inconsequential. “What is man that you are mindful of him? You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor.” He doesn’t say man belongs to the subspecies of *Homo sapiens*, having evolved from homo

sapiens idaltu. No. He says, “You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor.”

We can handicap and be handicapped by low expectations and unbelief. But God builds us up and turns us into who he wants us to be.

For example in the waters of Holy Baptism, you came out different than what you were going in. Going in you were a child of nature. Come out, a newborn creature. Going in a sinner. Coming out now also a saint. Going in, a son or daughter of your parents. Coming out, a child of God. “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (Jn. 3:6).

God turns us into who he wants us to be, and he has the highest expectations for us. Coming up to the Lord’s Supper, burdened and dirty with sin. Leaving from the Lord’s Supper washed by the blood of Christ, white as snow. As far as the east is from the west so far has he removed your transgressions from you. Coming up, knowing something of Jesus. Leaving as member of the Body of Christ. Coming up having family and friends. Leaving adjoined to the communion of saints.

Because of the people of Nazareth, Mark says, “he could do no miracles there.” But because of God, we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength (Phil. 4:13).

God turns us into who he wants us to be. “Even though we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:5). By our own wisdom or strength, not his people. By his grace: called, redeemed, holy.

God turns us into who he wants us to be, and where he wants us to be. “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So our citizenship is in heaven. Heaven is our home.

Even we can tie God’s hands with our unbelief, but he unbinds us by his forgiveness. We limit, inhibit, restrain and constrain him with our low expectations, our doubts and unbelief. But takes off our shackles of sin, unbinds our fetters of death, delivers us from the entanglements of the devil, and frees us so we can live and breathe and run and not grow weary.

With our unbelief, we make him less than who his is.
With his deliverance, he makes us more than who we are.
Thanks be to God. Amen.