

FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT – JESUS IN HIS HOMETOWN

A little boy once asked his grandfather, “Grampa, do you think about the hereafter?”

“Yes, Billy, I do, all the time. I walk into a room and I think to myself, what did I come in here after?”

This morning’s Gospel reading has some intriguing dynamics between Jesus and his friends and family when he goes back home to Nazareth for a visit. It’s a good illustration of the adage that “familiarity breeds contempt.”

It’s interesting that this passage in Mark mentions his mother, his four brothers and his sisters, but doesn’t mention his father. Presumably Joseph, who was probably a good bit older than Mary, had died by this time.

Mark tells us that “Jesus came to his hometown.” Maybe it was a family birthday, or some other family gathering. Even though his 12 disciples were with him, making what must have been a formidable group in that little town, no one could accept the idea that Jesus was somehow special, with gifts of healing, preaching, teaching. They had known him as a little kid, and they had known him as a teenager,

And they had known him as a young man finding his way. 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, so much so that he had to leave town. In fact Luke’s version of this story says that the townsfolk were so filled with rage that they almost threw Jesus off the edge of a cliff, “but he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

I remember what it was like to go back to my home parish in Philadelphia a couple of times while I was in seminary and preach a Theological Education Sunday sermon. Terrifying! Not to mention the time I preached at my father’s funeral. For years our family had been very active in the parish. I had gone to Sunday School, been an acolyte, a member of the youth group. I think I may even have gotten in some trouble in Sunday School.

I could just imagine people saying: “Isn’t this Polly and Barclay Knight’s son Linny? We remember him when...” So when I graduated from seminary I left Philadelphia and headed west, to Idaho and then to San Francisco. Better to face total strangers than people in my hometown.

Familiarity breeds contempt. This account of Jesus’ visit to his hometown of Nazareth is a story of failure. Not at first – at first the people were “astonished”, apparently in a good way, that anything worthwhile could come from the mouth of this young man they had grown up with.

But the people soon turned against Jesus. “Where did this man get all this?” He’s just an ordinary guy, like us, here in this hick town. Hadn’t they heard about Jesus’ extraordinary deeds around Galilee -- calming the sea, the dramatic healings, feeding the 5000? Somehow in his hometown of Nazareth Jesus seems to have had his power neutralized, like kryptonite!

Our temptation is to disparage the people of Nazareth – how could they be so blind as not to realize who Jesus was – the power of God in a human life? But look at ourselves – my life, and I suspect your life too -- is constantly marked by disbelief and rejection of what God is able to do -- in us and in the world around us.

What’s blocking us? What’s holding back God’s work in our lives? For me it’s a bunch of things -- laziness, fear of trying something new and different, fear that something will change, or that nothing will change. Fear that I will have to change. I know I feel reluctance to get out of my comfort zone. Maybe it’s an overfamiliarity with Jesus – taking him for granted. I’ve known about him all my life. I envy the enthusiasm of the new convert, for whom the power of Jesus is fresh and alive. Has the story of Jesus become so familiar to you that it’s lost its power?

Often the hardest place to share our own faith is at home, with our family, or at work, or with our friends. Why is it so hard to share our faith with our friends, our children, or even our life’s partner, on the level we’d like to share it?

Familiarity does breed contempt. Or at least indifference. It’s OK if we keep our faith as believing in something that happened 2000 years ago, in biblical times. It’s history

– ancient history. But if we bring it to today, it feels different, doesn't it. The reluctance, the disbelief of the people of Jesus' hometown – that's us the Bible is talking about. We're the ones who refuse to acknowledge the power of Jesus in our lives and in the lives of others.

Many of us have known Jesus all our lives. We've heard all that Jesus stuff. It's all too familiar. I think far too often the church immunizes us with just enough religion that we become immune to the real thing. We become immunized against the radical demands of the Gospel, the message proclaimed by Jesus of love and acceptance for everyone.

Everyone.

Christianity is a message of good news – of God's unconditional love and acceptance of all people. All people. No exceptions.

As an aside, we just saw the documentary "Won't you be my neighbor?" about the life of Fred Rogers. Mr. Rogers knew what good news is – that "you are perfect just the way you are." The child is closer to God than the adult; the sick are closer than the healthy; the poor are closer than the rich; and the marginalized closer than the celebrated. So, "be kind."

When I woke up this morning I saw the news about the four boys who had been rescued from that cave in Thailand. And I thought to myself, "What if some of those boys were Democrats and some were Republicans? Or Jews and Arabs. Or Russians and North Koreans. Refugees and ICE officers. Black and white. There would be a world-wide rescue effort to save those boys that would bring everyone together, with all nations cooperating."

So the charge to us from this Gospel reading this morning is not to be jaded by our familiarity with Jesus, especially those of us who have known him for many years. But to see Jesus anew, with fresh eyes and open hearts, and to recognize the presence and the power of Jesus in our lives today. And to proclaim his message, of God's love and acceptance of all. And, be kind.