



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 8, 2018

EZEKIEL 2:1-5; PSALM 123; 2 CORINTHIANS 12:2-10; MARK 6:1-13

A DIFFERENT HOMETOWN

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.]

I saw Jesus this week — on the volleyball court, on the balance beam, and in a cheerleading uniform. But we'll get back to that.

Let's talk about today's gospel first. It's a unique story about Jesus' teaching in his hometown of Nazareth and the rejection he encounters there, but it might ring true to

anyone who's returned to their childhood home after becoming an adult. It's not easy.

So as Jesus and his disciples travel among the Judean villages, teaching about God and healing people, he stops in his hometown. As is his practice, he speaks in the synagogue, the meeting place of the community. And he's a hit, impressing everyone.

“We had no idea he was this good!” they say. “How did he get so wise all of a sudden, get such ability?” But in the next breath his former neighbors begin cutting him to shreds: “He’s just a carpenter — Mary’s boy. We’ve known him since he was a kid. We know his brothers and his sisters. Who does he think he is?”ⁱ

A modern translation of the Bible called *The Message* sums up this story by saying, “They tripped over what little they knew about [Jesus] and fell, sprawling. And they never got any further.” After that, Jesus isn’t able to do much of anything in Nazareth — he lays hands on a few sick people and heals them, that’s all. He can’t get over their stubbornness. So, he and his disciples move on.ⁱⁱ

What do you suppose is going on with Jesus’ hometown folks? They encounter Jesus and even though he is doing something new — sharing wisdom, imparting healing — they fixate on the old — they knew him as a child, therefore inferior; he’s raised by common people, so just like them; he’s trained to work with his hands, not teach or preach. When it’s clear that there is so much more to Jesus than they ever knew, they are disoriented, offended, and they summarily reject him. Which breaks the bond between them, batters their trust in God, and blocks the healing that Jesus offers.

Why is Jesus’ wisdom and power so threatening to them? I wonder if it’s because his spiritual growth while he was away from home and his widening group of followers highlight their own stagnation and loneliness. They may not like being narrowly defined either, but perhaps they’ve come to believe the myth that there is nothing more for them. They can’t let Jesus rise above the station fixed in his youth, because then they’d have to consider the idea that maybe with the grace of God they can expect more, deserve more, and be more than they believe present circumstances allow.

It takes a whole community, an entire hometown to maintain the myth of limitation, but Jesus rattles it with his wisdom and power.

What would it look like to be a different hometown — one where a person is seen as more than their limitations, where they are fully known for their unique gifts and dignity? It might look like the community of L’Arche, and many of us saw the power that comes from such communities this week at the Special Olympics USA Games here in Seattle.

There are 150 L’Arche communities all over the world and four in the Pacific Northwest; “l’arche” is the French word for “ark,” like Noah’s ark. And just like Noah’s ark, L’Arche is a place where a diverse group of people find

safety from life's storms. They are intentional communities of friendship and faith where people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together. Members with intellectual disabilities are not the clients or patients, but friends, teachers and companions. They are the heart of L'Arche.

People without disabilities are also friends and companions, as well as students, caregivers, and witnesses. They are witnesses to the inherent and sometimes underestimated qualities of those with intellectual disabilities, like compassion, courage, wonderment, and welcome.

If you attended the Special Olympics USA Games this week, you were a witness, too. This was the 50th anniversary of the world's largest sports organization for people with intellectual disabilities, and the Games featured fourteen different sports. No matter which event you attended the perseverance, hard work, collegiality, and competitiveness — the grit — of the athletes mixed with the freedom and delight of playing sports was palpable.

I was moved by the young women who struggle with gross motor deficits in their daily lives but who performed on the balance beam in front of packed stands. I remember one gymnast who moved slowly and tentatively through a complicated routine, pausing often to check her position. She fell

off the beam three times, and each time immediately pulled herself back up.

There was no pause or tentativeness between fall and remount; it seemed almost instinctive.

Her courage and persistence were so compelling; it shattered any correlation of power and strength with intellect and ability.

You saw this again and again on the volleyball court, the soccer field, the track, the pool. People of all abilities working together as athletes, coaches, referees, judges, cheerleaders and fans. They talked about the fullness and joy they experience with Special Olympics and how it has transformed their lives. Not only their lives, but their families and communities.

Being a part of an inclusive community of people both with and without intellectual disabilities makes them realize what it means to be human. Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, says "Growth begins when we begin to accept our own weakness." That's what Paul is telling the Corinthians in the second reading today. Growth begins when we begin to accept our own weakness.

Paul is talking about a core message of the gospel — that great reversal where because God's grace is enough, power is made perfect in weakness. Jesus is the paradigm of strength

in weakness; his willingness to bear his own helplessness and mortality out of trust in God and love for others is the source of the eternal, liberating, and life-giving spirit of Christ. Paul knows it in his own life and says, “I will gladly tell of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”

This is also what Jesus is telling his followers to embrace as he sends them out two by two to proclaim God’s love and offer healing to those who suffer. “Don’t take anything with you — no money, no food, no extra clothes,” he says. “You will be needy and vulnerable. By knowing your own weakness, you will be free from the illusion that any power you have is self-created.

Out of your weakness you will show how God is working in you and in this broken world.” And that is good news.

I saw Jesus this week — on the volleyball court, on the balance beam, and in a cheerleading uniform. That same power of Christ dwells in each of us, empowering us to be a different kind of hometown where each person is known for their unique gifts and dignity, not their limitations. And where each of us knows the grace of God not despite our weakness, but because of it. Amen.

ⁱ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.



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