

Pentecost 5/Lectionary 14

July 5, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Ezekiel 2:1-5

Psalm 123

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

Christian author Philip Yancey – whose writings I highly commend to you – once related the following story:

I remember my first visit to Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park. Rings of Japanese and German tourists surrounded the geyser, their video cameras trained like weapons on the famous hole in the ground. A large, digital clock stood beside the spot, predicting 24 minutes until the next eruption.

My wife and I passed the countdown in the dining room of Old Faithful Inn overlooking the geyser. When the digital clock reached the minute, we, along with every other diner, left our seats and rushed to the windows to see the big, wet event.

I noticed that immediately, as if on signal, a crew of busboys and waiters descended on the tables to refill water glasses and clear away dirty dishes. When the geyser went off, we tourists oohed and aahed and clicked our cameras; a few spontaneously applauded.

But, glancing back over my shoulder, I saw that not a single waiter or busboy – not even those who had finished their chores – looked out the huge windows. Old Faithful, grown entirely too familiar, had lost its power to impress them.¹

How often have we heard the saying, “Familiarity breeds contempt”?

The word “contempt” may be a bit too harsh for what I mean here. Let me give you a for instance... Any parent should be able to relate to this: Are your children more likely to take advice from you, or from a complete stranger? For spouses: Have you ever had the experience that someone else can tell your spouse something you've been telling them for a long time, but when that person tells them it's as if they've heard it for the first time?

Familiarity is just what we're dealing with in today's reading from Mark. Jesus has returned to his hometown, and just like when he began his ministry by preaching in the synagogue, people are once again amazed at his teaching. But then something happens... People begin to question, saying, “Hey, isn't this little Jesus, Joseph's son? The kid that grew up helping his father around the workshop? Why, we've known him since he was *THIS* high! And now *HE'S* going to tell us how we ought to be living?!? I don't think so!”

Jesus' response? That famous saying: “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” This is precisely why we pastors will never be allowed to return as pastors to the churches where we grew up. It is because people would have a very hard time seeing us as anything more than the little boy or girl they tended in the nursery, taught in Sunday School, or shepherded through Confirmation.

The text goes on to tell us that Jesus was not able to do the same sort of “deeds of power” that he had done in other places, except for healing a few people. The text seems to be telling us that Jesus wasn't able to perform the same sorts of miracles, or as many, because of the lack of faith among the people in his hometown. But let's make no mistake – making faith a requirement for miracles puts us on dangerous theological ground. The question is not, *Do I* have enough faith to cause a miracle? Miracles are always up to God's activity, not ours. Of the 20 miracles Jesus performs in the Gospel of Mark, in very few of them does Jesus mention faith.

The place of faith in Jesus' miracles is not the faith of the person enabling Jesus to perform the miracle. After all, Jesus is God! Jesus can do whatever God can do. The place of faith in Jesus' miracles is the willingness of the person to: (1) *believe* that Jesus can perform a miracle; and, (2) approach Jesus. When Jesus was in his own hometown, his own familiarity as “Joseph the carpenter's son from Nazareth” was what prevented the miracles from taking place. People held back from even asking because of their unbelief that Jesus could actually perform these “deeds of power.”

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So we have this story of Jesus' rejection in his own hometown paired with the commissioning of the disciples to go out on their first mission. Jesus instructs “them to take nothing for their journey except a staff: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts” – only wearing their sandals and a single tunic.

This sending forth of the disciples with only the clothes on their back has been the model of many religious orders throughout the ages. It is often thought that those who undertake a vow of poverty do this so that they may be unencumbered by material possessions, be less likely to be lured away by the trappings of worldliness, and therefore be closer to God. However, if we take a closer look at these religious orders, what we find is that the vow of poverty is undertaken in order to be closer in community, both within the order and with the communities in which they live. Such poverty is intended to create interdependence, solidarity, and mutual service.²

I think this is what Jesus was urging on his disciples as they ventured forth on their first mission: To travel light. To go out without possessions, so that they may become thoroughly embedded in the communities to which they ministered. They would then be completely reliant on the hospitality of strangers. When in such a position, there is no way they could survive without becoming a part of the communities where they sought to evangelize. While familiarity worked against Jesus in his own hometown, he yet urged his followers to become familiar with those to whom they ministered.

And we heard in the last bit of today's reading that this approach worked! We're told that the disciples “cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” It was by becoming a part of the communities to whom they ministered that they became familiar. And because of the people's familiarity with the disciples, they became open to becoming familiar with the one in whose name those miracles were performed; they had faith in Jesus.

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I can tell you from first-hand experience the powerful witness you can be simply by being actively involved in your local community.

For over four years I lived in a very strange “in-between” status – between seminary and ordination. I wasn't a pastor, but I wasn't quite a lay person, either. During that time John Mark and I moved here to New Jersey, and into government housing at Picatinny Arsenal.

If you grew up in a small town, you haven't seen anything until you've lived on a very small military base! I even had the weird experience of once having someone tell me everything I'd been doing, when I hadn't even been out of the house. It's worse than the smallest small town you can think of.

In the first three and a half years we lived at Picatinny, I was still in that strange in-between state. My neighbors got to know me as the person across the street – a person of faith, but not necessarily as a pastor. A few of my neighbors began to talk to me about their problems with organized religion. Both of them related stories about having been abused in the name of religion. I think it was for this reason that neither one of them would ever have spoken with a chaplain – a representative of “organized religion” – but it was okay for them to talk to me as Becky, their neighbor. It was precisely because I had become a non-threatening, familiar part of their community that we could have these conversations. And by the grace of God, my hope is that their hearts have once again been opened to the possibility of faith.

I think I've previously told you about our friend, Larry. Larry wore his little Jesus fish pin on his suit jacket lapel every day to work. He knew that working for the government, evangelizing is strictly prohibited. However, there's nothing wrong with answering people's questions when they ask what the pin means... <G> And it was because people knew Larry as their co-worker and friend that he was able to be such an effective witness for Jesus. That relationship, the familiarity, made them open to hearing what Larry might say.

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Jesus would have us not only be in close community with him, but also with our neighbors. While today's text is often used to urge people to shed the trappings of materialism in order that we might become better disciples, this is not necessarily what I am urging you to do today. What I would like you to consider is: Is there something, or things – not necessarily material things – in your life preventing you from being fully in community with those around you? Your “community” might include your neighbors, co-workers, friends, or even family. Is there something which is holding you back from being a vibrant witness to Jesus? Are there some things you need to shed in order to travel light, so that your light might shine before others and they might come to know Jesus? This is what I urge you to consider as you leave here today.

Amen.

[1,593 words]

¹ Philip Yancey, “What Surprised Jesus” in *Christianity Today*, 12 September 1994, 88.

² “Living Poverty as Fraternity” in *SFO (Secular Franciscan Order) International Council, Vol. 4, No. 40* (October 1998). <http://www.ciofs.org/per/1998/lc98en40.htm>, downloaded 7/4/09.