

Life In A Small Town

Mark 6:1-6

Jesus left that place and 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.

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Mark 6:1-6

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I.

This morning, I have what amounts to a fairly strange perspective on today's scripture reading from Mark 6. Whether or not it will amount to enough to constitute a sermon, both qualitatively and quantitatively, remains to be seen. Summer is upon us, though. It is the perfect time of year for whimsies and flights of fancy. So, with that said, we are off and running.

I received an email the other day from the Presbytery of Northern New York. As defined by the Book of Order, Part I of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA, a presbytery is the council serving as a corporate expression of the church within a certain district and is composed of all the congregations and teaching elders within that district. Seems they (that is *we*) are in a bit of trouble. Actually, its much more than a bit. Long story short, they/we are running out of money.

II.

So far as I could tell from the email, those in leadership roles see only two ways forward: raise \$500,000 for the endowment so as to generate sufficient interest on the principle to meet the budget deficit, and/or merge with another presbytery (Utica).

Now, before I go any further I have to tell you I've always been a bit of an outsider when it comes to presbytery so take everything I am about to say with a very large grain of salt. My presbytery of care (Western New York) hassled me mightily while in seminary and going through the ordination process. This presbytery (Northern New York) would not approve my call to the Canton church until brought to heel by the search committee and Session. For the past 26 years I have gone from very involved to hardly involved at all. You can only bang your head on a rock for so long before deciding (to quote Forrest Gump) stupid is as stupid does.

III.

My initial reaction to reading this email was a stunned disbelief which was anything but surprising. For the past (too) many of years the presbytery has endeavored to meet its budget deficit by taking \$20k (or more) off the interest on its current endowment. On top of that, they are soliciting an additional \$30k in funds from whatever churches opt to contribute to what they have dubbed the “Sustaining The Dream” campaign. This actually shows up in the mission budget, and represents the largest share of it. How you call money designated for one’s own administrative costs as “mission” is beyond my comprehension (which I have pointed out repeatedly). Last year they raised a little over \$29k and the bills got paid. This year, they have received less than \$10k in commitments. So, of course, it makes *perfect* sense to now try and raise a half a million dollars to bolster the presbytery’s endowment from these very same churches.

IV.

As for the merger option, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the idea. There is a time and season for everything. The rub comes, though, when you realize this is just kicking the can down the road. Worse, the very same people who got us into the mess in the first place will now have more time to mess up more things. The rationale given for such a merger is that the number of congregations in the presbytery, and the corresponding number of members *in* those churches, have fallen below the critical mass required to do the work of a presbytery. Which, on the face of it, is quite true I am sure.

The question is, why; what caused this? Now, the prevailing answer you will hear is that churches all over the country, of every denomination, are struggling and, apparently, many are more than willing to accept such a rationale and eagerly drink that particular Kool-Aid. Perhaps, but the same question applies: why, and what is causing this? The answer they will give is that there are many cultural and societal reasons, much of which is far beyond our control. Which, again, is quite true.

V.

All of that said, there are at least two very important factors which are still well *within* our control. First, rather than asking the congregations and their people to support the *presbytery*, perhaps we could try putting the horse *way*

out in front of the cart and, instead, have the presbytery support their member *congregations*? Second, we need to be honest with ourselves about what *is* and is *not* working, and have the courage to accept the reality that at some point results must matter.

Now, these are uncomfortable truths. Few people want to hear them, and even fewer people want to speak them. The truth *will* speak for itself, eventually. Unfortunately, it takes awhile for people to start listening. Usually because things have become so dire that they have no other choice *but* to be honest with ourselves, acknowledge our mistakes, and take on the enormous and difficult task of overcoming inertia and changing momentum.

VI.

Then, of course, there are those instances where people simply will not listen at all to the truth. Such is the case in today's scripture reading from Mark 6:1-6. Jesus arrives in his hometown and starts to teach in the synagogue and proclaim the Good News. Which, we assume, is the same synagogue in which he grew up.

At first, the people were astounded by all the knowledge Jesus obviously possessed and shared, by the wisdom that had been clearly given to him, and by the deeds of power done by his own hands. All of which was readily apparent and beyond dispute. After all, the Good News is GOOD. However, as the scripture tells us, at some point the people there took offense. Why? Because they slowly started to recognize the identity of this guy. "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they rejected the proclamation owing to the one who was doing the proclaiming.

VII.

As this passage so vividly demonstrates, when it comes to scripture context is *key*. Not only the context of when a passage was written, to whom, and why, but also the context of interpreting the meaning *of* that scripture later on down the road. For those like us who live in a small town or, like Jesus, who grew up in one where we are known and it matters where we shop, worship and socialize, this passage makes perfect sense and is absolutely understandable.

No where does misery more love company than in a small town. We do not like to see people rise too high or too quickly, preferring everyone to stay at the same relative level. We despise any tide that rises those boats willing to weigh their anchor. In a small town, it is easy to feel like one has a handle on things. The lines that demarcate who is in and who is out matter greatly. When those lines blur, or are crossed, we feel as if we are losing control. In a small town, reputation is everything. It hard to shake, and even harder to change.

VIII.

Of course, there are a great many advantages to living one's life in a small town. Positives which far outnumber the negatives. *How* you are as person far more important than *what* you are. In a small town, we cannot help but be part of a community. While not necessarily always "friends," our neighbors know us and will almost always make the effort to help when hard times come. Living in a small town teaches us to abide a certain level of discontentment because is impossible to ignore that life, and people, are rarely perfect. We learn to be realists, and not make excuses. Ironically, though, this predisposes us to a sense of gratitude for all that is imperfect. In a small town, time is on our side. Relationships deepen over our years together. While it is always hard to forget, it becomes easier, if not essential, to forgive. And, counterintuitively, even though there is less to do and fewer people to know, life in a small town actually creates a larger and more inclusive worldview precisely because we must keep everyone in our frame.

IX.

It is for these reasons, and there are plenty more where those came from, I offer a fairly strange perspective on today's passage: I think Jesus copped out. I certainly do not pretend to know the mind of God, or the reasons Jesus decided to do the things he did or didn't do. That he felt his time would be better spent moving on to other towns was certainly his own right decision to make (and the same decision I made with regards to my involvement in presbytery). Further, I am more than familiar with the sense of amazement Jesus felt from the unbelief shown by those who knew him best, and how disempowering this can be. Son of God or not, Jesus was fully human and I am sure he got his feelings hurt. We have all had such an experience and our first reaction is to go off and lick our wounds. Still, I cannot help but think that had he chosen to do so Jesus could have eventually turned the worm if he just stuck it out.

X.

Stuck it out, but also took a different approach. Remember, context is key. What had worked in every other town certainly did work with those in his own home town. This much is clear. I am sure that with some hindsight Jesus learned this very lesson. When he could do no deeds of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them, he should have been honest with himself about what *is* and is *not* working. While Jesus is to be applauded for having the courage to accept the reality that at some point results must matter, when we aren't getting the results we seek we must change the reality; beginning with one's own reality.

XI.

Not that anyone is asking me, but if someone from presbytery *were* to inquire as to my perspective on the current challenges being faced, I would tell them that they (that is *we*) need to stick it out. Stick it out, and take a different approach. Specifically, to use today's story about life in a small town, small church, and small presbytery as a guide.

The work of the church, at every level, is not rocket science, but there is a science to it. It is not about having the knowledge, or the wisdom, or the power. It is about knowing others not as you think they are or assume them to be. Not as someone's child or sibling, but as who they have actually become. Then, allow those people to come to know you by demonstrating a level of care and concern for *them* such that it will begin to their unlock hearts, when leads to an opening of their minds and, finally, sets loose a spirit of generosity. Moreover, the work of the church is to embody and make real the reality of just how GOOD the Good News really is. Even, and especially, in the face of the many cultural and societal circumstances which are far beyond our control.

XII.

The current model of the presbytery is simply not working, has not worked, and will not work regardless of how much money gets raised or if we merge with another presbytery. Administration without ministry is not a viable model for the church. We need to be honest with ourselves about this.

It isn't about what we are, is about who we have become. We also need to be courageous enough to judge our actions and decisions by their results.

Rather than put \$50k a year into the cart of administration, let us change our own reality. Let us allow the horse to lead by using that money (or at least *some* of it) to do *actual* mission, and to support our local congregations in their life and work. If the real challenge we face as a presbytery is to have a critical mass of congregations, and the corresponding number of members *in* those churches to do the work of a presbytery, doesn't it just make sense to first start by supporting our member churches and the people in those pews. To do anything less, or anything different, is to demonstrate an astonishing unbelief in the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those living life in small towns, and small churches, all across northern New York. Amen.