

The Incredible Power of Unbelief  
Mark 6: 1-13  
Ladysmith First United Church  
July 5, 2015

Today's reading from Mark 6 begins on a disturbing note. If you are reading from the "Good News Bible," you can't help but notice the headline: "Jesus is Rejected at Nazareth." He has just recently raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, healed a woman with a long-standing bleeding disorder, calmed a storm and walked on the water, and sent a herd of pigs over the cliff as part of healing a man with demonic spirits. He seems to be going from glory to glory. And then he goes to Nazareth, his home town. And he's rejected.

He goes to the synagogue, he wows them with his teaching ability. They recognize him as the one who has been working miracles. They recite his pedigree and document his family history. And then, they reject him.

It bothers us—if we stop to think about it. How could they do that? We wouldn't respond that way. Doesn't Ladysmith have a lot of streets named after its citizens? Our church has its Hardwick Hall, Jessie Baird Room, Dave Stringer Room,...

If this incident were reported only once in the Bible, we might chalk it up to "Mark's opinion." But Matthew 13 and Luke 4 provide parallel accounts. Jesus is rejected in his home town and his healing ministry is curtailed. Both Matthew and Mark attribute this to the lack of faith on the part of Jesus' home town. Luke adds that the people dragged Jesus to the edge of town to throw him over the cliff—but he walked away.

What can we learn from this story? We've heard, no doubt, plenty of sermons on faith; today I want to look at unbelief. It's not something we want to nurture, but it's something we need to recognize in ourselves.

**First** of all, unbelief obscures the obvious. Jesus was a Jew, and this short passage begins with him following devout Jewish practice. He goes to the Synagogue. Luke's account indicates that Jesus was perfectly within His rights as a teacher (rabbi)—the attendant handed him the scroll, indicating an invitation to read and comment. The reading he chose was from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come." He hands the scroll back to the attendant and sits down. Just imagine being there (if you are an adult male, of course—we women would have had to hear about it at home). Jesus has performed miraculous deeds, he has come to your home synagogue, the powers-that-be have endorsed his right to speak, and he's just read a description of the awaited Messiah. You and everyone else is watching and waiting for his next words, which are "This passage has come true today, as you heard it being read." (Luke 4:21) Light bulbs should have been going on. Healing + teaching + Isaiah's prophecy + Jesus' calm assertion. Shouldn't they have been excited? No, their unbelief totally obscured what we think should have been an obvious connection.

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**Second**, unbelief elevates the irrelevant. Rather than receiving Jesus as the Messiah, or even showing common hospitality to the visiting rabbi, their attention turns to irrelevant details. They focus on his trade and his family. Most young men in those days followed the career path of their fathers. Jesus must have learned the trade from Joseph, as the people ask, “Isn't this the carpenter? Mary's son? Don't we know his brothers and sisters?” All of these facts were undoubtedly true, but they were irrelevant to Jesus' ministry.

**Third**, unbelief assaults the messenger. The impact of their unbelief on Jesus is more clear when one looks at the Greek text. (I took exactly one semester of New Testament Greek, and that was 30 years ago; I probably can't even recite the alphabet any more. But with the help of a concordance with Greek cross-references, I can sometimes learn something interesting.)

The *Good News Bible* says “He was greatly surprised because the people did not have faith,” the *New International Version* says “He was amazed at their lack of faith;” The Message says, “He couldn't get over their stubbornness.” The *King James Version* says “He marveled because of their unbelief.”

Now “marveled” or “marvelous” are not words we hear every day (takes me back to Lawrence Welk and Ed Sullivan). It was not a common Greek word either. In fact, it appears only 21 times in the New Testament, 19 times in the Gospels. Usually the word describes peoples' response to Jesus—they marveled because what he did was incredibly spectacularly outstanding, almost unbelievable.

Twice in the New Testament, it is Jesus who marvels: The first time it is his response to the great faith of the Roman centurion who requests healing for his servant, the man who said “Lord, don't come to my house, just speak the word and he will be healed.” Jesus' words were, “I have not found anyone in Israel with this much faith.”

This time, Jesus is astonished, shocked, disappointed and dismayed. He marvels at their lack of faith. The fully human-fully divine Son of God was personally impacted by their unbelief.

**Fourth**, unbelief reflects low expectations. We often say that “familiarity breeds contempt,” and the phrase fits here. Nazareth was a small town, a town where everybody probably knew everybody. The Gospel of John records that when Philip tells Nathaniel about Jesus, he identifies him as the promised Messiah and also as from Nazareth. Nathaniel's response: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46)

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In spite of the fact that Jews were waiting for the Messiah, in spite of the fact that Jesus had clearly amazed them with both his teachings and his miracles, in spite of the fact that he had just read from Isaiah and had pointedly identified himself with the text, they were not expecting him. And so, they didn't recognize him. And from there, it was just a short step to rejection.

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I've had a few weeks to think about this text and so I'll offer you a few examples that have come to my mind as I wondered how our faith measures up against the faith of the people of Nazareth.

**First,** How do we ignore the obvious? Many years ago I took a “Sociology of Religious Experience” course and the professor, made a strong case for the irrelevance of religion in a modern era. I know now that he was trying to goad us into a response—and finally someone said, “Doesn't the fact that religion is still practiced mean anything?”

Some of us remember Doug Astle. I remember one Easter sermon; actually I remember one idea from one Easter sermon. “The fact that we are here this morning,” he said, “is proof that something profound happened that day.”

There are so many things we could be doing today, but the fact that we are here is an obvious statement of who we are, what we believe, and what we value.

Wonderful things happen every day. We can choose to ignore them, to discount them, or to give thanks to God.

**Second,** Do we sometimes elevate the irrelevant? Of course we do. I have been known to reject the message because the grammar was incorrect. I have left books and articles unread, because I looked at the authors' credentials first.

We have changed the words of beloved hymns to reflect “political correctness” to the point that it's impossible to sing from memory. It's hard to come up with an example that's not going to offend anyone, so I'm reaching back a ways. I remember a popular Mennonite hymn, “Heart with Loving Heart United.” One of the stanzas ended with “Kindle in us love's compassion, So that everyone may see, in our fellowship the promise of a new humanity.” Sounds good, doesn't it. But it had to go—fellowship was too exclusive because we're not all fellows. The new words became “So that everyone may see in our faith and hope the promise of a new humanity.” Faith and hope are noble virtues, but the message of the hymn was a challenge to live so that our relationships to one another would be a witness.

**Third,** Have we been guilty of assaulting the messenger? My father was a minister; I grew up in the church and was a church employee for twelve years—I can say, without a doubt, that church work is both rewarding and painful. If you have ever volunteered to do something (and not just at church) you have probably been misunderstood and hurt. Usually, we get over it.

Sadly, we may also have contributed to one another's hurt. When we have stood up and said, “Everyone knows,” or “it's obvious that,” or “who's idea was it any way?,” we run the risk of deeply wounding a fellow believer.

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These three habits of ours reflect misplaced values. They hurt our witness to each other and the world; they cause us to doubt and do nothing to further God's kingdom.

**Finally**, What about low expectations? Has familiarity bred, if not contempt, then complacency among us? Have Easter, Advent, Lent, Christmas, communion become so routine that we get from them about what we expect, which is “precious little?”

I think Paul's letter to the Corinthians sheds some light on expectations. He talks about a man he knows who had a supernatural experience, “whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know---God knows.” This same man was caught up into Paradise, and again Paul says “whether in the body or apart from the body, I do not know, but God knows.” It seems that Paul is unsure what to make of all this—he seems to find it both credible and incredible.

Then, in the next paragraph, he concludes that God has balanced out his own supernatural experiences with a “thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment me.” We don't know exactly what his problem was. II Corinthians was written in about 55 AD, or three years before Paul's death. Some scholars suggest he had bad eyes, some that he struggled with general ill health after a tough life, some that he's dealing with memories from his past, some that he's referring to a specific person. Whatever, Paul asked three time for the problem to disappear and God's answer was “My grace is sufficient...my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Paul's expectation—relief from some ailment—seemed like a great one. But in reality, being free of discomfort was a low expectation. Relying on God's strength brought a greater reward.

Where does that leave us? Fortunately, we get to write our own ending

When we look deeply into our own lives, I'm afraid that we see ample of evidence of unbelief.

Unbelief is incredibly powerful, not just for our own spiritual health, but for the impact it has on Jesus' ministry. Verse 5 clearly says, “He could not do any miracles there, except that he placed his hands on a few sick people and healed them.” We tend to look at miracles as the precursors to faith, as the proof of God's power. This story turns that idea upside-down. Jesus' power was limited because of their lack of faith. When we ignore the evidence and reject the truth, God's work suffers.

It was true that day in Nazareth.

But the story doesn't end there. Christ's ministry was not de-railed. Jesus carries on teaching from village to village. The second half of today's reading from Mark describes the commissioning of his disciples. They are given power over evil spirits, given instruction for

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the task and sent out. Verse 12 sums their ministry: “They went out and preached...they drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.”

We have a choice. May God grant that we side with the disciples, that we exercise our faith, that we carry on Christ's ministry in our time and place.