

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday July 8, 2018 Proper 9B
Gospel of Mark 6:1-13
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: Granting Transcendence

Our Gospel story today is supposed to be a story about a local boy made good. Jesus goes back to his roots, back home, and does what he does best. He teaches, and people are amazed. He reveals wisdom, and people are threatened. He challenges the way they see the world, and they are offended. So, what is supposed to be a homecoming story, a look at my boy-didn't he turn out well-he's so smart kind of tale turns into rejection.

This story of one moment in Jesus' early ministry is about a mission that has to be aborted, about Jesus reaching out to those around him and being rebuffed and taken for granted. It is a cautionary tale really, about thinking too little of others, of discounting one another's gifts, and of having too little faith in our brothers and sisters in Christ, of being contemptuous of that which is familiar and near at hand. "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (vs. 3). I think that this passage is a reminder **that people are a deep mystery and that our job is not to limit them, or put them in their place, or try to sum them up, but to fan them into flame and encourage them to become the living light of Christ in the world that they are meant to be.**

Jesus is wise enough to realize when things are simply not going well. He manages to heal a few people, and then he walks away from the whole scene baffled by their unbelief, their sheer unwillingness to let something powerful happen in their midst, to become open to the power of God at work all around them. It begs the question: Are we open to God doing a deed of power in our midst? How is it that we tend to limit the power of God? Is our God too small?

Jesus sums up his adventures in the hometown synagogue this way, "Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown, among their own kin, and in their own house."

What is a prophet exactly? If you had to define *prophet* what would you say? I was reading an interview recently with Matthew Fox, who put it this way. "The mystic in us is the lover. The mystic says yes. But the prophet in us is the warrior, and the warrior says no, "No, this is unjust. No, this is suffering that we can work to relieve." That's the rhythm of the mystic and the prophet, the lover and the warrior. It's not enough to be one or the other." So, I believe that Jesus calls us all to be mystics – lovers of God, of creation and of each other, but God also calls us to be prophets or warriors, people who defend what we cherish, who work for the dignity of every

human being.

This is a challenging view of the prophetic, the prophet as one who interferes with injustice, one who engages people through their own religious and moral imagination in ways that wake others up to what is happening in the world. For Jesus this was about the poor being able to lead decent lives, caring for those who suffer, welcoming the stranger and sojourner, and breaking down barriers that divided people from one another.

Today's story of Jesus is filled with amazement. The townspeople are amazed at Jesus' ability to reveal God, and Jesus is amazed at their inability to respond enthusiastically to this revelation. The townspeople seem to believe something that we are all tempted to believe: that the ordinary excludes the extraordinary. However, Jesus sees things differently. It is not that God only works through special or learned people or official people. Jesus is amazed because if God can work through him, one of them, then God can work through them. If Jesus can be part of God's healing of the world, then so can the ordinary people to whom he is bringing his message. Being part of repairing the world, *tikum olam* in Hebrew, is within the reach of every person.

You may remember a famous quip by Mark Twain, "Familiarity breeds contempt and ... children." I'm not proposing to talk about how familiarity breeds children today but what about this contempt part?

Familiarity with others brings knowledge about them: the way they look, how they choose to dress, talk about their health, their age, their likes and dislikes. It also includes other things as well: their work and recreational activities and the histories that go along with these. Where they have traveled, what hobbies they enjoy and what social successes or failures they have collected and endured over time. Once we are familiar with someone we gather up the information in our minds, forming a kind of image of their personality and its features: their introverted or extroverted style, their persistent fears and anxieties, their affections and appetites, their values and moral stances, etc. What happens is that once we are familiar with someone we tend to have them "nailed down" or, in another image, we have them "in a box." Either way it is difficult for them to move outside of our understanding of them. They are hemmed in by our perceptions. (Shea)

I'm guessing that you know what I mean. It is difficult to hold the knowledge that we have about others lightly, especially when we are sure that we are right about them. And, to add to our trouble, our perceptions are confirmed time and time again by what those whom we know well say and do. Once we have people "in a box" we tend to try to fit everything they do into the box and leave little room for them to act out of character or outside of our understanding of who they are.

Now I want you to consider what happens when you inadvertently overhear the box that other people have put you in. It can be a very eye-opening experience, and we

are often offended if this blessing ever comes our way. We are more than they think we are. They have simply cut away everything of us that does not fit into the paltry categories that their meager minds could manage. We are so much more than they have decided that we are. They cannot nail us down! You can't put me in a box, I'm a deep mystery and you only know a small part of who I am.

If you have had this experience, it is the beginning of wisdom. It is a powerful thing to realize that others are categorizing and limiting you by their own mental sizing-up. But it may also lead one to reflect on another reality: we are always more than other people think, but other people are exactly as we depict them. The familiar townspeople would not let Jesus out of his box in Nazareth. Yet they probably believe that they are beyond boxes themselves.

This, then, is an interesting spiritual opportunity, how to deal with our own tendency to box others in while not wanting to be boxed in ourselves. There is a way out of this dilemma which involves beginning to stay aware of how tightly we fit, if we fit at all, into the boxes other people have made for us. It is a humorous and helpful practice to remember that whenever we are analyzing and predicting one of our familiar's behaviors, not far away we too are being analyzed and predicted. If we can stay with the thought, it will lead us to something akin to the Golden Rule, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you (Mark 12:31)."

The key word in this gospel message is "do." We are bidden to grant people what one theologian, John Shea, called transcendence, because we know that we are transcendent beings, and thus they also must be. I love this idea of "granting one another transcendence," being generous and hospitable in our categorizing and analyzing of others. Leaving things open for the unexpected. We are people of faith, and our faith tells us something delicious. It tells us that each one of us is ultimately a mystery because we are inescapably related to Ultimate Mystery. In the truth of this, we are always more than we manifest and therefore always more than the boxes that others put us in. This is a deep truth and a deep mystery that each of us hold inside of ourselves.

If we will dare to do this for one another, to grant each other transcendence, we may be surprised what will make itself known. Surprising gifts and actions may make themselves felt in our everyday lives that lie hidden beneath the surface waiting for permission to be manifest. When we are surprised by those whom we had "nailed down", we are faced with an interesting choice. We can face the fact that our categories for the person were inadequate to their gifts, or we can reject them like they did Jesus of Nazareth. One is the way of humility, and one is the way of rejection. Humility is the way to new life, and rejection is the pathway to death.

CS Lewis in his book entitled The Weight of Glory says something about the transcendence of human beings that has always moved me.

It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken.

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.

All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.

It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

*There are no ordinary people.
You have never talked to a mere mortal.*

Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat.

But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn.

We must play.

But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption.

And our charity must be real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner—no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment.

Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.

In the community of faith, I would like to hope that all of us break through the boxes of ordinariness that others have constructed for us. They did not think we had it in us, but by God's grace and the Spirit's energy we are more than able to transcend

others' limited visions. They are surprised, and look at us in amazement as if we are a stranger. But really, we are ourselves. Familiarity has been overcome. And the kingdom of God has come near.

It is easy to say that Jesus is about love and inclusiveness, but I really don't want to stop there. I really don't want to be the one to say what Jesus was all about. I don't want to summarize Jesus. Instead I want to open Jesus up to each of us. What each of us is invited into is to have our own experience of Jesus, to discover the depths of God in this person who was God's beloved. We are simply asked to first have our own experience of Jesus and then to be loving enough, courageous enough to share that with others in a myriad of ways. There is no one way to share the Good News of the Gospel, because good news comes in so many shapes and sizes, in comes in the very size that each one of us needs, in the ways our peculiar and idiosyncratic lives need it.

If we will dare to do this and allow each other to do it, we will be living not just our ordinary lives but the extraordinary lives that Christ has in store for each of us, for there are no ordinary people in Christ Jesus.

I am deeply grateful for the commentary of John Shea on this passage and his notion of granting transcendence to others.