

“Unwelcome Prophets”

Mark 6.1–13

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 7 July 2003

This is one of those passages of scripture that could easily produce about 20 different sermons. It is densely packed with rich themes and clues about Jesus and the original message with which he equipped the first disciples. We learn that Jesus had siblings: four brothers names James, Joses, Judas, and Simon and that he had sisters, who unfortunately remain nameless. It really puts a crimp in the Roman Catholic tradition that Mary was a perpetual virgin!

We learn that Jesus sent his followers out to do two things: to heal and to encourage people to repent (or as Luke puts it, to proclaim the arrival of God's kingdom). Now, repentance is one of those loaded theological terms, isn't it? If you have trouble with its familiar connotations in our culture (read “Elmer Gantry” for more on this), try approaching it through its Latin roots *re* and *ponere*: to reposition or replace. In other words, take the broken parts of your life and replace them with wholeness. That's what Jesus was asking people to do, and he was showing them an alternate path for doing so. And healing God's world is one of the great callings of the church, whether it means doing missionary work, or education or advocating for social justice: it's all a part of encouraging healing and wholeness, and helping to bring in the kingdom of God here and now.

Well, all of this is really pretty interesting, but it's not actually what I'm going to focus on today.

What about this lousy reception Jesus gets?! Here's the local boy made good, who returns to his hometown. And all the folks back on the farm can say is “Shoot, isn't that Jesus, the ne'er-do-well son of Mary?” “Yep, he's the long-haired kid who keeps drifting from town to town, announcing the kingdom of God – whatever *that* means.” “Why doesn't he settle down and get a *real* job with Joseph?” I'm sure that none of us would ever be so parochial about receiving one of our own young people back here in Ft. Collins. (Okay, well, maybe we'd *try* not to be so parochial!)

They call him “the carpenter,” and “Mary's boy.” How could he possibly be the real item? How could this stream of wisdom – **subversive** wisdom – that Jesus conveys actually be his own doing? Is it conceivable that this roughly dressed, probably illiterate peasant named Jesus could be teaching in the synagogue and actually have something intelligent to say? The writer of Mark's gospel goes so far as to say that the locals “took offense at him.”

Why would they be offended? Let's look at it this way: Jesus was not the kind of guy you'd want to meet at a dinner party: he was always challenging what was “good and accepted” thought. The good old boys at the local synagogue saw the different message that Jesus was proclaiming and thought it heretical. And we would probably do the same thing today!

When we stand up and crow about “family values,” we're flying right in the face of what Jesus was saying. The Torah says that we should honor our fathers and mothers, but when his mom and siblings show up and try to force their way through a crowd and get in to see Jesus, how does he respond? He rejects the basic family unit by saying, “Who is my mother? And who are my brothers?” And pointing to his disciples, he said,

'Here are my mother and my brothers!'¹ Jesus is shredding the basic fabric of Jewish society! No wonder people were offended!

And in today's reading, we get an inkling that Jesus' "family of origin" isn't so crazy about what he's doing. He certainly *wasn't* doing what was expected of him: going into his dad's business and being a nice boy. Rather, Jesus was acting out and hanging out with the outcasts and the nobodies. In other words, he was becoming a nuisance and an embarrassment to his own people.

And when you go around and tell people that "you nice, pious, wealthy, observant Jews may not be such great shakes, and it's the dregs of society who more often act faithfully," you're not going to win many friends and influence the "right" people.

How do you think you'd react if Jesus showed up here at Plymouth some Sunday? Most of us are relatively nicely dressed, well-healed, highly educated, solid citizens. More often than not, we're the keepers of the status quo, rather than the people who are pushing the envelope. Don't get me wrong: I think we're a pretty neat bunch of people; I'm just not sure that Jesus would fit in very well. Though if we accept Jesus as "a model of human wholeness and human responsibility," we've got some work to do. As John Dominic Crossan, a well-respected New Testament scholar put it, "Jesus was a Judean hippy in a world of Augustan yuppies."²

What do you think Jesus would say about what we're doing? Suddenly, we look an awful lot like the scribes and Pharisees, don't we?! How many of us have gone out this week to proclaim the liberating realm of God? Probably a few more of us than those who have gone out, sold all our goods, and given the proceeds to the poor.

Do you ever have trouble hearing or accepting something difficult – whether it's a critique or an idea or a suggestion – something that you'd really rather not hear? Truly, it's really difficult to get news that's true, but not pleasant or easy. It occasionally helps if you hear it from someone you love and trust, but even then, it can be hard to get feedback from your spouse or your parents when you mess up or fall short. And I think that's part of the dynamic in Jesus' teaching in the synagogue: the people who think they already have their religious act together get blind-sided by this status-quo disturber, so they go for the jugular and attack his authority.

What's happening, though, is that Jesus is raising awareness of something new: it's a new teaching that is all about compassion, rather than about purity. And that's a bitter pill to swallow if you've devoted your life to following the purity codes, and if you see that as what God expects from you as a person of faith.

Think for a moment of the **awareness** Jesus asks of you: is it awareness of the plight of your fellow humans? (What you do to them is what you do to the least of these, who are members of my family.³) Is *awareness* putting aside your self-righteousness? (Let them who are without sin cast the first stone.⁴) Is *awareness* seeing the face of God in all people? (Pray for your enemies and bless those who curse you.⁵) What is it that your faith has made **you** aware of? And what must you do to bring yourself more in line with the way of life Jesus calls us to?

Well, **Jesus isn't an easy guy to follow**. But, he never claimed that he was. That's one of the reasons that following Jesus in a deep and meaningful way is not popular.

¹ Mt 12.47-48

² Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*.

³ Mt 25.40

⁴ Jn 8.7

⁵ Lk 6.28

Calling yourself a Christian isn't so difficult; living life as a Christian is a continual challenge. It isn't *easy* to do the things that Jesus asks us to do. To say that you will be blessed with material wealth in proportion to your faithfulness has absolutely nothing to do with the message that Jesus came to convey. Jesus never said that if you are faithful, God will reward you financially. If anything, the opposite is true.

So no wonder Jesus wasn't popular with everyone!

What Jesus calls us to is a changed life, a life that centers around his way of living in closer relationship to God. It's a life that may not give you everything you **want**— which makes it a hard sell for Madison Avenue — but it is a life that delivers what satisfies your deepest **needs**: for connection with God and each other.

Jesus didn't win any popularity contests either with the home crowd or with the Roman powers that be. He had no wealth, and he died like a common criminal hanging on a cross. That's not what most Americans are after. So, what our faith offers is profoundly countercultural. It is the way of sacrifice and the way of the cross, but it is also the path of deep joy, of relationship with God, of profound awareness, and of helping to bring in God's reign of justice and peace.

May we each follow that narrow path and walk together in faith. Amen.