

November 5, 2015
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Jesus our Brother

Mark 6:1-6
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

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.

Today I'm going to stray from this Sunday's assigned lectionary texts, for two very good reasons. The first is that I would like to 'book end' this month of November sermon themes, which always ends with "Christ the King" Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year (with the first Sunday in December always beginning the NEW church year.) I'll begin this month's sermons with a prelude to Christ our King, taking a different view of Jesus than we normally see him- that being "Jesus our Brother."

(This is not a totally novel approach, believe me, though it is slightly out of our normal repertoire of themes.)

The second reason we will hear this particular lesson is because, well- on my last brief visit to see my mother the other week, who will be turning 90 this Thanksgiving, she did it again. As happens during most of my visits with her now, she plays a kind of "show and tell"- and I never know what she's going to come up with next. Last week she pulled out a collection of photos that she received from one of my aunts, who is now moving (reluctantly), into a life-care facility. My aunt is giving everything away- including her most treasured pictures. So my mother had a brand new collection of photographs- from 1943- to show off, when she was 16. And they are wonderful.

My Mom had two brothers and two sisters, (she is the middle child.) My favorite picture of the collection is of her being flanked by her two brothers, Dutch (Earl) and Glenn- all with big smiles on their faces. Dutch has his navy whites on, he hadn't shipped out yet, and Glenn couldn't look happier (which is a wonderful thing, because in a few years he'd suffer a debilitating bout with bacterial meningitis.)

The picture took my Mom back in time, and me with her, in remembering those days and the love she shared with her two brothers, not unlike the love and kinship shared by so many people blessed with brothers.

As I drove back from my visit, I couldn't help but think about growing up with my two brothers, Ed & Rob, looking up to one, and trying my best to set a good example for the other (I'm the middle child, too.) I could never write as well as Ed, or play third base like him either, or do data analytics like he does (I didn't get the 'Math gene'.) And I'm happy to say that my younger brother, Rob has a Law degree (which I don't) and is a very successful small business owner, in his own right.

So, in the way that I think about things, all of this took me to this particular scripture lesson, one of the few family scenes we have in the Gospels of Jesus' adult life. It's an interesting scene in lots of ways, not the least of which is about family dynamics...

Jesus has just returned to visit his hometown, presumably Nazareth- and a scene takes place that needs some historical and cultural interpretation. In the Gospels, coming from the ancient world- and not our own... a return to one's hometown was more of a social than a geographic statement.

A hometown is where people know all about you, from your birth, growing up, to whatever rung you may have reached on the ladder of life. The *ancient* world was an "Honor Society" (not a merit-based society)- a many tiered society with few on top and many on the bottom. And as Jesus returns home as a skilled teacher and gifted healer, many people's worlds are turned upside down. Here is this Jesus, born to unwed Mary- fathered by a simple carpenter, a day laborer, you know, the brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon, and all his unnamed sisters.

He startles them with how impressive he is... well read, articulate, poised, sure of himself... and they took offense at him.

In antiquity, honor was a limited good. If someone gained, then someone else lost. Any new claim of prestige or honor was a threat to the establishment, no matter how small or provincial. Jesus wasn't born into a place of prestige and honor in his hometown, and there was no way for him to earn it and rise above his station in life. To do so, he'd have to displace someone else. Thus the swift and thorough response of the hometown crowd. They couldn't tolerate him upsetting the system. This was the issue at stake. Jesus would have to be cut down to size.

Now, this is extremely important background to all the gospel stories, of an ongoing dynamic and flow of how all the Gospel accounts play themselves out; the underlying dynamic in Jesus' ministry, teaching and parables- and the motivation of the authorities, from King Herod on down to silence Jesus, one way or the other. But I am getting ahead of myself...

Today we have a story about Jesus, seen in a different light, who journeys with us in ways more helpful than we normally recognize. Though the Gospels don't track the words of Jesus' brothers and sisters, literally- how they acknowledged his gifts and grace, his support and sacrifice, there are a couple of later New Testament references about how Jesus is clearly a brother with us in the faith. In both the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans and in the general epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus is referred to as one among the great family of God, deeply united with his other human brothers and sisters, going before us as our intercessor to the throne of grace.

This got me wondering about all the ways we think about Jesus; how we relate to him in everyday, helpful ways.

For today, let me pick out three ways that we regard Jesus as our brother, consciously or not; an older brother, most likely, one we look up to and who has gone before us to pave the way ahead.

I see Jesus as an encourager, an example and a friend.

This brief episode in Nazareth delivers a striking insight into Jesus' role as an encourager. Though his hometown crowd derides him and tries to discount him- their reaction doesn't take him down. He is amazed by their unbelief, lays his hands on a few people who were sick to heal them, and then goes on his way. The next passages of the story are even more revealing about Jesus' character. He goes into the villages, calls the twelve disciples together and gives them their marching orders for ministry. Undaunted, his signal words are direct: "follow me."

Then Jesus goes on to be an example, and not just with his healing touch and words of forgiveness and grace. He sets off for places no one else would go and meets people outside his normal social circle. He heals those outside his own religion, he brings back to life those who otherwise opposed him, even a child of a Roman soldier.

I have to think that for Jesus' brothers and sisters- by blood or affinity, their level of anxiety rose with every social or religious barrier he crossed. And that was a good and necessary thing. It

isn't easy, but sometimes we need a little push to do the right thing, no matter what it is. And in that ongoing tension we meet up with Jesus.

Not long ago I heard a story about a woman, a mainline Christian, who worked as a clerk in a small bookstore. Shortly after she opened the shop one morning, a man came in the door, a Hasidic Jew, by what he wore.

As she turned on the lights on around the shop, she asked, "Would you like any help?" "Yes", he answered softly, "I would like to know about Jesus." She directed him to the shelves upstairs, to the religion section and books about Jesus. But he responded, "No, I'm not looking for any more books, tell me what you believe about him."

"My Presbyterian soul shivered," the woman later said. But she gulped and told him everything she could think of about Jesus. Her guest then sincerely thanked her for sharing and left quietly. She never knew what happened to him. But she knew what she felt; relieved that she was able to articulate who Jesus was to her better than she thought and encouraged that she really did believe what she said. "Even as I spoke", she said afterwards, "I felt that I wasn't alone- that somehow, Jesus was with me encouraging me on.

That's how it happens, sometimes.

To be truthful about Jesus, he is an encourager and an example, but he is also honest enough to allow for the potential of rejection to remain. And in that challenge of saying the words that we really believe, or in doing the right thing- what Jesus would have us do, in that moment of question and tension, Jesus begins to be present to us. He becomes part of the fabric of our lives, and we become part of his body, collectively following, as faithfully as we can. Step by step.

In the end, Jesus is our brother and our friend- always ready to be at our side, to share our journey, and especially, to share a meal. On this All Saints Sunday when we remember so many, those brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, mothers & fathers, grandparents, cousins and friends, we come together as Jesus's family; living and sharing his message and presence in and with our lives.

We all have a place in the photo album of Jesus' family.

We all have a place at the table of grace, as well. In Jesus' name. Amen.