

Hometown Prophets

Mark 6:1-13

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A few years back Garrison Keillor, of *Prairie Home Companion* fame, granted a newspaper reporter a rare glimpse of his private life in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he lives with his wife and daughter. He picked the reporter up at the airport himself and told her he'd like to begin by showing her around the city, his hometown. He took her to one of his favorite places in St. Paul, an outdoor sculpture of Lucy, the wonderful antagonist to Charlie Brown in the ever-popular cartoon strip, *Peanuts*.

Lucy, you will recall, keeps Charlie Brown rooted in reality, keeps him from becoming a victim of his own hopeless idealism. Lucy, who every fall holds the football for Charlie Brown's place kick. As he approaches full speed, Lucy always pulls it away at the very last second, causing him to fall on his back, a rude dose of life's consistent reality.

The cartoon's brilliant originator was the late Charles Schultz, also a native of St. Paul. Keillor likes the sculpture of Lucy because it reminds him that Charles Schultz first presented the concept for what became the most popular cartoon in modern history to the local newspaper and was rejected. It wasn't imaginative, clever, or very funny, the editor of his hometown newspaper told him.

The sculpture is a reminder, Keillor said, that your hometown can do that to you on occasion. Sometimes we miss something important and lifesaving, something beautiful, something life changing because it is so ordinary, perhaps too familiar.

One day Jesus returned to his hometown for a visit and a rude awakening. Everyone in Nazareth knew him, Mary's son, the carpenter. It wasn't a large place at the time—maybe a few hundred people.

Like any small town, in Nazareth everyone knew everyone. We assume that Jesus' father Joseph must have died when Jesus was a boy and that Jesus assumed responsibility for the business and the care of his mother and younger brothers and sisters. He had attended synagogue with Joseph on the sabbath. He learned the Hebrew language of his people in that synagogue, learned to read the Torah, the Psalms and Prophets in Hebrew even though he spoke Aramaic, as they all did. When Joseph died, Jesus continued to go to the synagogue, now bringing along his younger brothers, James and Judas and Simon, seeing to it that they learned to read as well. Then, when he was about thirty, he left Nazareth. The townsfolk said he had fallen under the influence of his cousin John, known as the Baptist, a fiery preacher who lived in the wilderness and baptized people in the river. Jesus himself had been baptized, they said, and then disappeared in the wilderness for a while, the dry, arid, rocky desert.

They said that he had become quite a rabbi: now he had disciples of his own, and they traveled through the small villages and countryside of Galilee. He was quite a teacher, they said. He had healed many people, made the lame walk and the blind see. They said he was so popular that crowds gathered wherever he taught, and many followed wherever he went.

Now Jesus had come home, according to our gospel text this morning. He stayed with Mary and his brothers and sisters in the house Joseph had built for them long ago. And on the sabbath he went back to the synagogue. The leaders, the elders, invited him to read and teach, and he did.

This story always triggers for me my memory of when I returned to my home church to

preach my first sermon after graduating from seminary. My father and close friends were in the congregation. Adults who led the youth group were there, who sometimes called me on the carpet for my refusal to stop talking.

Church folks who had watched me grow up were all there, the ones who knew me at my best and, sadly, at my worst.

This is likely to be that kind of occasion for Jesus. They handed Jesus the scroll to read, and when he commented on the passage—that is to say, when he preached his first sermon in his hometown synagogue—they asked one another, “Where does he get all that? Who does he think he is? He may be a big hit over in Galilee, but here he is still Jesus, the carpenter, Mary’s boy.”

In Jesus’ day it was an act of sheer arrogance for someone of Jesus’ lowly origins to speak out publicly. The villagers of Nazareth knew Jesus, and they thought him to be nothing special. His mother and siblings lived among them, and they were ordinary folk. Jesus was a journeyman carpenter at best, not a sage or dignitary, and his apparent ability to perform “deeds of power”—like healings—simply didn’t add up.

So, the townsfolk, and even some members of his own family, were offended by him, perhaps by what he said, perhaps by what they thought was his presumptuousness. Whatever the reason, their attitude was effective. In fact, Mark tells us, their outright rejection of him worked a negative miracle of sorts, captured in what certainly is the most puzzling line in the story: “He could do no deeds of power there.”

Mark does concede that Jesus slipped in a few random healings, but nothing like what all the shouting was about earlier in Jesus’ ministry. And so, it was Jesus’ turn to be astounded: “He was amazed at their unbelief.”

I am struck by the fact that the good people of Nazareth missed something important because they thought they already knew what they needed to know. This is not in any way a critique of their particular form of Judaism; all religions share the sense that “we have the truth, the truth has been given to us, and we know what we need to know.” We don’t need anything more, thank you very much.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “God is always sending us people to disturb us—to wake us up, to yank our chains, to set us on fire—because about the worst thing that can happen to us, religiously speaking, is for us to hold perfectly still without changing a thing until we turn into fossils...God is all around us,” she writes, “speaking to us through the most unlikely people. Sometimes it is a mysterious stranger, but more often, I suspect, it is people so familiar that we simply overlook them—our own children and parents, our own friends, and neighbors, all those hometown prophets who challenge us, love us, and tell us who we are.”¹

This hometown rejection is Jesus’ first experience of failure. It was time to leave and move on, and far as we know, he never went home again.

The consistent witness of the New Testament, and one of the hard truths of the gospel, is that Jesus is *continually* rejected by his own people. He fails to work successfully even among those who supposedly know and love him best. Rejection by anyone evokes powerful emotions, but such rejection is especially painful when it comes at the hands of friends and relatives.

As Jesus prepares to extend his own ministry through the sending of the Twelve, his experience of failure and rejection in Nazareth seems to color his instructions to his disciples in two ways.

First, along with telling them to cast out demons and heal the sick, he gives them a ritual for failure when their message is not received: “If any place will not welcome you and they

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, pgs. 110-111.

refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”

Shaking the dust from one’s feet was an ancient gesture used by pious Jews as they returned to Israel from a Gentile (*i.e.*, non-Jewish) land; it symbolized separation from any clinging form of impurity. This ritual stands as a testimony before God that the townspeople have refused to receive the ministry of those Jesus sends.

But it’s not only what this ritual does to the townspeople; it’s also what it does for the Twelve: it helps them bring closure to any failed initiative and move on from it. The people of God are not to waste their resources fretting over those who, for whatever reason, fail to be receptive. Nor are we to waste our time in self-pity or self-judgment when things don’t go as planned.

Just as Jesus acknowledges, with disappointed wonder, his rejection by his own people and then moves on to other villages, so his disciples are admonished not to tarry seeking to persuade those who refuse his message and ministry. It’s time to leave and move on.

As Jesus gives instructions to those commissioned to do his work, he offers another, far more important lesson that I think grew out of his experience of failure in Nazareth. When you enter a new community, rely on the hospitality of others. He admonishes those he sends to stay at homes where they are welcomed, until they are ready to leave.

I think failure for Jesus in Nazareth led to his embrace of a whole new sense of humility and vulnerability, gifts that he now invites his disciples to practice in their mission work. To rely on others for food and shelter, to receive the hospitality of a household with joy and gratitude levels the playing field for those who are serving with those who are being served. It acknowledges that the hospitable host has as much to offer us as we have to offer them. It acknowledges that we both have something to share with each other.

This kind of humility and vulnerability is uncomfortable for many North American Christians. We are more used to playing the host, more comfortable and secure in providing help than in receiving the gifts that the recipients of that help can offer us.

For centuries, the missionary work of the Christian Church was anything but humble and vulnerable. More often than not it served as an instrument of European and North American colonialism, operating with the hubris that we have something to bring to Indigenous populations that we think they lack. Over time, the term “Christian missionary” became such a negative term to indigenous people in the developing world that the church in the modern era has all but abandoned its use. Now we send *mission co-workers* to the far corners of the globe, who come at the invitation of native Christians, who rely on the hospitality of their indigenous hosts and work in partnership with them as equals. We *now* go with a profound sense of humility and vulnerability, that perhaps we have as much to receive as to give.

This, I think, is the most important lesson to take away from Jesus’ experience of failure. Humility and receptivity to the gifts of others must be the cornerstone of the church’s ministry today.

Amen.