

Text – Mark 6:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

You may be surprised when I tell you that MIT has a football team – and, yes, I mean that MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology! And if that is a surprise to you, here’s maybe an even greater surprise: that same MIT football team finished last year with an undefeated regular season!

Yet another surprise may be that I’m talking about football in the middle of baseball season. Actually, I’m doing so because of the relevance of the analogy to today’s Gospel – but maybe you will prefer to think that this sermon is coming out of a “post-surgical fog.”

In any case, surprise often results when preconceived notions are overturned by actual facts – facts which differ from our mistaken assumptions. We may be surprised when a school known for academics achieves athletic excellence.

In truth, though, we shouldn’t be surprised, any more than the folks of Nazareth should have been surprised that one of their own, a carpenter named Jesus, could also preach a fine sermon and achieve some fame as a prophet and a healer!

But listen to what those people said about Jesus: “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 ...?” (Mark 6:2-3a).

Twice before in this gospel, Jesus had taught in a synagogue, and each time he met opposition: once from an unclean spirit, and once from the congregation (Mark 1:21-28; 3:1-6).

In this case, however, it was his neighbors, including, we assume, friends and relatives, who turn against him. What might have started as a friendly and curious observation changes as these people talk themselves into an attitude of skepticism, asking question after question until they find themselves opposed to Jesus’ ministry.

Maybe Jesus should not have been surprised. Mark the evangelist told us earlier, “When his family heard [about his actions], they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind’” (Mark 3:21).

Later, Jesus was told that his family had come after him, perhaps to drag him home. But having asked rhetorically who his mother and brothers were, Jesus said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:34-5).

Something else a little odd occurs in Mark’s telling of Jesus’ visit to Nazareth. In addition to asking if this is the carpenter – not the carpenter’s son – they note that Jesus is “the son of Mary.”

Now normally in that society, one would identify the son by the name of the father. Perhaps they mention Mary because Joseph was no longer living, but some experts wonder if, calling to mind the story of the virgin birth, which some in a small village might not find believable, they are questioning his parentage by mentioning Mary rather than Joseph.

Just as Mark tells us that hometown folks were astounded at the skill Jesus demonstrated, which fueled not admiration but disbelief, the evangelist tells us in turn that Jesus was also astounded at their disbelief. And because of it, Jesus was able to accomplish almost nothing, aside from a few healings.

We can conclude that the rejection by the people of Nazareth was a profound disappointment for Jesus. Might that be why, while Jesus is identified by others as Jesus of Nazareth, he himself is never quoted as saying, “I am Jesus of Nazareth”?

There is no easy fix when we are deeply hurt by people we thought we knew well. There are no Band-Aids to cover deep pain and disappointment. Indeed, sometimes we can hardly help being paralyzed because of destructive emotional pain.

Still, it’s worth noting (even while admitting that this won’t fix the situation), that Jesus, perhaps hurting from having been rejected by his hometown family and friends, sets about doing the work of the kingdom:

“Then he went about among the villages teaching.” Although this neither fixed anything at Nazareth nor undid whatever pain Jesus might have felt, he continued his ministry. That at least represented something positive after a painful situation.

And when we respond with something positive after a painful encounter, we are walking in his footsteps. When we continue in the work of the good news by teaching Sunday school week after week, attending board and committee meetings, visiting shut-ins, saying daily prayers, sharing our gifts, studying the Bible, expending our energy in the work of God’s kingdom, we are doing as Jesus did after being rejected in his hometown.

Once again, bear in mind that Jesus’ hard work did not solve his problem. It didn’t heal the family rift. But it still represented a positive reaction to a negative situation.

It’s worth noting that Mark’s is the only gospel that identifies Jesus himself as a carpenter. However, unlike our society, which places high value on skills people possess and develop, this doesn’t sound like the compliment it would for us. A lot of that has to do with the value a society gives to work.

In the Roman Empire, much of the work was done by slaves, or by people who were little better than slaves. In general, the elite did not consider work either a virtue or a pathway to respectability.

In the “Parable of the Unjust Steward” (Luke 16:1-13), for instance, a member of the upper class who is about to become disgraced laments that he is not able – or willing – to dig for a living.

In this regard, it’s worth noting that Jesus is not pictured as speaking to the commanding officers of the Roman occupying army during his ministry, but he interacted well with centurions, those officers who rose as commoners through the ranks to the highest position accorded to them. And in his parables, Jesus spoke of farming, shepherding, building, and house cleaning.

It seems that the folks from Nazareth had trouble believing that carpentry prepared one for the work of teaching, healing, and performing miracles. Indeed, they seem to have thought that this disqualified Jesus. Was this because they valued some forms of work more than others?

The real question is – like those of us who may think it odd that the bright and intelligent students at MIT might also be good football players – do we assume that people engaged in some professions are disqualified for church work? Or do we restrict church work to people who play musical instruments, sing songs, or preach the Word?

Whatever work serves the kingdom, whatever benefits those Jesus referred to, in Matthew’s gospel, as “the least of these,” is the work of the kingdom (Matthew 25:40).

Farmers engaged in the hard work of planting and harvesting, students and academics, white-collar accountants, blue-collar plumbers, people with no collar – even pastors – are qualified to be the face of Jesus in the world.

The family of Jesus tried to control him, to rein him in. His neighbors tried to limit his ability to serve God because of his profession. Do we try to control what is right or wrong for ministry for family, friends, youth, senior citizens, children and folks from all walks of life because we have already decided for God what God can do through others in the church we share?

The lesson here is pretty clear: Don’t put people into a box. God can do anything. The prophet Amos was “... a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees” (Amos 7:14). The apostle Paul was a tentmaker. Some apostles fished for a living. One collected taxes.

And Jesus was a carpenter from a small town. Deal with it. Or better yet – get to work! And do it in the spirit of Christ. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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