

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
July 8, 2018

**“Home Grown Scandal”**

“Jesus said to them,  
‘Prophets are not without honor,  
except in their own hometown,  
and among their own kin,  
and in their own house.’  
And he could do no deed of power there ...”  
Mark 5:34

Prelude:

Over the years I’ve gained a deep appreciation for the gospel of Mark. As a child, I recall the question being posed by the adults in my life: of the four, which is your favorite gospel? I don’t recall anyone answering: Mark.

There were John fans; Luke advocates; Matthew partisans; but I don’t recall anybody ever offering a preference for Mark. In some way Mark was second-tier gospel; a gospel, yes, but not quite as robust, not as full, flavorful, as its literary companions.

It is the smallest of the four included in our New Testament. In telling the Jesus story, it starts late (baptism), ends early (empty tomb), so it lacks in mass what is in comparison to the others. This may account for some holding Mark to be not fully developed, to lack refinement.

Gospels – a unique construct of Christian literature proclaiming “Good News,” *evangelion*. Good message.

Gospels – a form of proclamation, patterned somewhat after ancient biographies from the Greco-Roman world –

not to be compared with modern biographies. Scholarship tells us ancient biographies were primarily concerned with “**showing the *character* of the main figure through his/her words, deeds, and interactions;**” with less concern shown for chronology and accuracy in research and reporting.

There has been consensus for some time affixing Mark with “**priority,**” meaning Mark was composed prior to the other Gospels (see Bart Ehrman, *Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 65).

I suggest Mark is primal gospel – the essence of the Jesus life is distilled to sufficiently instruct and edify those who follow the script. In working with Mark we have opportunity to obtain an elementary education in gospel studies. The author gives us the rudiments of gospel, all that is basic and fundamental to understanding the good news that comes by way of Jesus, the Christ, the anointed of God.

I mention this for if we misread or mistake Mark, it stands to reason we will misread and mistake and misconstrue the gospels that used Mark as a basis for their own telling of the Jesus story.

If we can get Mark right, we will spare ourselves being both misinformed in our dealings with the God who summons us to life, and misanthropic in our dealings with others who share our common lot.

\*\*\*\*\*            \*\*\*\*\*            \*\*\*\*\*            \*\*\*\*\*

Our lesson this morning comes in two parts.

- (1) a recollection of Jesus spending a sabbath day in the town of his youth (which didn't turn out all that well!);

- (2) Jesus pairing the disciples into mission teams, and sending them out - with clear instructions - to contend against **“the unclean spirits”** ruling the world (Mark 6:7).

The two parts are seemingly different, but there is a thread linking them. In each there is the element of rejection. Being misunderstood. Being dismissed. Denied. Being turned away.

In his survey of the New Testament, Bart Ehrman calls Jesus the **“misunderstood”** child of God. Ehrman poses the question: who really knows who Jesus is? The answer, according to Ehrman, is a bit of a surprise.

- (1) God knows;
- (2) Jesus seems to know (it was disclosed to Jesus in baptism, **“Thou art my beloved ... in whom I am well pleased,”** (See Mark 1:11, KJV).
- (3) Powers/principalities, the demonic forces creating havoc in the world, they apparently know; recall the episode of healing where a man encountering Jesus cried out: **“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? I know who you are, the Holy One of God”** (Mark 1:24; see also Mark 3:11 - fascinating verse: **“Whenever the unclean spirits saw Jesus, they fell down before him and shouted: “You are the Son of God!”**) Unclean spirits, oppositional forces, they know.

Who else knows - according to Ehrman, only two others are “in the know.” The author of the gospel who is telling tales; and those who read, who study the writ. No one else within the gospel seems to

get Jesus quite right; including and especially those who are closest to him. This includes family and those we call followers, the disciples.

The gospel, we might say, is designed to clear up misunderstandings, which is why we are devoted to its study.

Twice in Mark's gospel, we are told Jesus goes home, neither time did it fare all that well.

**"He went home,"** we read in chapter three, and proceeded to create quite a fuss. The family, who weren't informed apparently, got wind of complaints: **"He has gone out of his mind,"** they were told. The family comes to the rescue, but Jesus wasn't looking for their help. That was the occasion he redefined family: **"Who are my mother and my brothers?"** Right here, he said, looking around at all who were assembled: **"Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother"** (Mark 3:35).

The second instance of returning to home we heard in today's lesson. Jesus shows up on the Sabbath, teaches Sunday School, and a dispute ensues.

**"Where did he get all this?"** What is this wisdom (that's the word used - *sophia* - ) wisdom that has been given to him; how did Jesus acquire *sophia*? And the deeds of power displayed - when/how did that happen (Mark 6:2)?

The problem? The hometown folks were limited in what they could see and understand coming from their midst.

**"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** (Mark 6:3)?

This is a fascinating verse that butts against church teaching that later developed concerning the mother Mary's perpetual virginity, which puts the church in the awkward position of teaching - the text doesn't mean what it clearly states. This is another problem - of interpretation.

Pertinent to the reading - Jesus has family in the hometown, and what is known about his family is being used to keep him bound to the town's limitations. Small-mindedness places a cap upon the boundless possibilities that come when God is a factor in the equation.

So Jesus is misunderstood. And discounted. And dismissed. He didn't have a good home/town life.

And what is truly sad - little good came out of the visit. Jesus - for his part - was amazed by the unbelief that limited much good that could have been. The people took offense, we read. They stumbled is a more accurate read; They were scandalized. They couldn't believe in the possibilities Jesus presented.

I'm the child of a small town - once upon a time.

**"The nice thing about living in a small town is that when you don't know what you're doing, someone else does"**

(Attributed to Immanuel Kant).

Small towns can suffer the small minded and limit the children God who would have flourished.

The poet, Mary Karr, rather graphically described her small town experience.

**"People who didn't live pre-Internet can't grasp how devoid of ideas life in my hometown was. The only bookstores sold Bibles the size of coffee tables and dashboard Virgin Marys that glowed in the dark."**

Jesus couldn't do much with a people who didn't expect much, who couldn't conceive of greater things. He needed to **"move on"** in order to live in the larger purposes of God. He needed to break from the smallness that limited the greatness he was charged to display.

This is an important task of the church that we need understand. That we foster faith that lives in the larger purposes of God. So understood - the church is a launching pad - equipping us for service in the world. But it is also a place to which we return, to recoup, to rest, to rejuvenate.

Howard Thurman is said to have often noted:  
**"A human being can't be at home everywhere, until they be at home somewhere."**

The church is our somewhere.  
A somewhere of acceptance and affirmation, somewhere where people love us enough to tell us the truth about who we are, and who we might be, and possibly why we are holding ourselves back - in check. We are all in need of a somewhere that cultivates growth, that doesn't induce guilt, that enlarges life with faith and understanding of being created in the image of God.

We are all in need of a somewhere where we can stumble, and people are there to pick us up, rather than lock us down.

We need a somewhere that we can be at home everywhere - which is a special grace in keeping with God's love for the world.

\*\*\*\*\*           \*\*\*\*\*           \*\*\*\*\*           \*\*\*\*\*

This brings us to the second part of the reading.  
If Jesus needed to “move on” beyond  
the confines of his misunderstanding home town –  
he prepares the disciples he pairs up to  
“move on” if they encounter similar reaction.

He does so with a call to **travel light**.  
To pare down the baggage we carry,  
to simplify our lives and live in a radical  
state of trust.

Take nothing for the journey, we read,  
except a staff; wear sandals and tunic;  
avoid the extra piece of luggage;  
and no bread, no bag, no money in the belt.  
This was non-profit ministry, designed to  
help others, and not personally benefit.

It is a consistent message embedded  
in our scriptures, a voluntary poverty of sorts,  
to gain the riches God provides.

Let us freeze the frame here for a moment  
and consider this. Jesus clearly outlines  
mission – in the world – with simplified life,  
unencumbered with worldly goods.

People take precedent over material things.  
This elementary lesson is consistently sounded  
in our New Testament.

As encountered in the thought of Paul,  
our abundance is a solution for someone’s need;  
and someone’ need is opportunity to display generosity.

The goal is this – for Christ-minded community,

holding grace and generosity,  
charity and philanthropy,  
to be finely tuned and fairly balanced  
by faith (trust).

Paul worked hard to get this across to the  
Corinthians, quoted (paraphrased) from Exodus.

**“The one who had much did not have too much,  
and the one who had little did not have too little.”**

The New English Bible (NEB) puts it this way:

**“The who got much had no more than enough,  
And the one who got little did not go short”**  
(II Corinthians 8:15).

Can you imagine –  
a world in which no one gets shorted?

\*\*\*\*\*                      \*\*\*\*\*                      \*\*\*\*\*

I sense we have rejected both the letter and  
spirit of this text – to travel light, as Jesus urges,  
to share gospel where the need is great – to **voluntarily  
reduce** what footprint we leave upon the world.  
This is a large part of our calling. Yet we  
have so cheapened grace – we’ve lost any  
sense of cost associated with discipleship.  
We are enamored with prosperity and privilege.  
We have taken God’s favor and used it as  
license to live large based upon **consumer  
entitlement**. The grace of God becomes  
a “blue light” special at Walmart, and never  
having to turn off the lights.

We fail to see that the economic freedom  
we cherish is killing us.  
Freedom without responsibility,  
faith without community,

God and me without you,  
is a falsification of gospel.  
You hear about such things in church,  
consider it fake church.

As an Earthwise congregation – this is a serious and compelling issue for us. I haven't mentioned it – but you may be aware – earlier this year China enacted a ban on “foreign garbage” which roughly translates in no more acceptance of global plastics and paper. It has created a backlog of growing piles of recyclables. What this means – it isn't enough that we simply recycle and feel good about what we are doing. We are running out of space. Volume exceeds capacity to process. In the UK, there is a proposed plan to eliminate avoidable waste within 25 years. The challenge has been laid out. The Brits are at least showing some forethought.

Jesus bids us travel light. To be unencumbered. to embrace simplicity – which is not simple, for it requires trust, and discipline, devotion and sacrifice.

\*\*\*\*\*                  \*\*\*\*\*                  \*\*\*\*\*                  \*\*\*\*\*

A former Sec. of Agriculture, Earl Butz, came to mind this week. Earl Butz was from Indiana, as I recall. I think he was a Purdue guy. Worked for Presidents Nixon/Ford. One of his often repeated phrases was: “Get big, or get out.”

Get big, or get out. That was not only a Butz quip, it was a way of thinking. It was a vision. It became policy.

Get big or get out – which has morphed into CAFU's and all sorts of large scale operations for

which we pay a huge price for cheap food.

Not everybody bought the program, though. Think about it - if everybody was required to "Get big or get out," we wouldn't have farmers' markets and craft breweries. We wouldn't have the richness born of diversity.

I appeal this morning to consider a simplification of life, based upon primal gospel. Travel light. Move on when necessary, without harsh judgment upon those who misunderstand the message, or who reject the message.

\*\*\*\*\*

I think of those we hold with some reverence as fitting examples, as inspiration for the Christian journey of life.

Francis of Assisi  
Gave up the family business

Dorothy Day  
Gave up the secular life

Thomas Merton  
Gave up Europe, gave up New York  
Gave up academia, for a Trappist monastery  
in Gethsemane, KY

Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Gave up his social standing to lead a poor people's march

Henri Nouwen.  
Left Yale, ended up in L'Arche community,  
living and working with the mentally challenged

Each in their own way are notable, not for what they gained and possessed in life, but for the manner in which they gave up the surroundings of material wealth to pursue a simplified life full of spiritual conviction; an elementary life full of primal concern for the gospel that reveals God's love and favor.

I realize, few if any of us will rise to the level manifest by the likes of these. But all of us can "do what we can, with what we have" to live a closer walk with Jesus, who bids us travel light. All of us can exercise choice to simplify our lives with primal gospel, with elementary, basic expressions of love.

Let this be our prayer. And may God be glorified.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*