

Unrecognized
Mark 6:1-13

“Where did this man get all this?” That’s the question for today. The people of Jesus’ hometown were probably excited to have a famous person from their own little village. I don’t know how many times that I have driven down the highway and seen signs saying, “Greenfield, Home of James Whitcomb Riley,” “Mitchell, Home of Gus Grissom,” I heard a speaker tell me that William Allen White once lived in El Dorado. Somewhere in Minnesota is a giant statue of Paul Bunyon, but I don’t think he’s a real person. Sometimes they are people I have heard of, other times they are not. We are often proud of local people who have done well on a bigger stage.

But it’s a two-edged sword. Sometimes we want to hide from our more infamous locals. I lived in Terre Haute, IN for years. We didn’t have a sign up to let people know that Charles Manson had spent time at the Gibault School for Boys. Neither did Indianapolis promote him as one of their native sons. He lived there for some time, also.

Jesus returns to his hometown and teaches in the synagogue. We’ve had some warnings about what might happen during a visit to Nazareth—a foreshadowing of Jesus’s rejection. Earlier in the gospel according to Mark (Mark 3:20,31), we learned that his family had gone out to restrain him because people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” Scribes who had come down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” They’ve heard those rumors circulating, but they have also heard tell of wonderworking. Is he mad? Is he a wonderworker? Is it possible to be both? In any case, someone decides to allow him to at least speak at the synagogue gathering.

And, at first things seem to go well. “Many who heard him were astounded,” Mark relates. Those words are so similar to the reaction of the congregation in Capernaum in chapter 1, when Jesus cast out an unclean spirit: “They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A

new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.”

At first it seems to go well. But then the crowd seems to turn on Jesus: “Where did he get this wisdom? 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.” They recognize wisdom...but at the same time...surely this is some kind of scam. What’s he trying to pull?

Honestly, when I read this story, I wonder how I would have reacted. I am not convinced that I would recognize the wisdom of God. In our society, for example, we’re so accustomed to looking at a person’s record and their credentials. What training do they have? What kind of grades did they get? What previous accomplishments can they point to?

Away from home, Jesus is a recognized teacher—a rabbi. At home—they know the limits of his credentials. They know he doesn’t have years of training as a rabbi. He’s not the rabbi’s son, therefore he is not a rabbi—not a teacher. He is a carpenter, plain and simple. He should stick to what he knows. We even have an old saying: Shoemaker, stick to thy last!

I think my pre-conceived notions would almost definitely get in my way. They have gotten in my way before, and I think I am lying to myself if I think I would have reacted any differently than these villagers. I would have looked at Jesus’s credentials and thought, like his family, that he had gone out of his mind.

The question that brings up, though, is how does that affect our lives in this day and age? What I want you to do, is think of how you would describe Jesus to someone who had never heard of him. What would he be like if he lived here in the United States in the 21st century? It’s a strange exercise, but not so strange. Several years ago, WWJD bracelets were very popular, and I still see them every now and again. What Would Jesus Do? To understand that, we have to have some idea what Jesus was like or what was most important to him.

The problem with that is, though, that we rarely have a very good idea of what Jesus would do. I read recently, in a book by Peter Rollins, “History is

overflowing with different portraits depicting the way that Jesus is the answer—Jesus the Marxist, Jesus the Capitalist, Jesus the meek, Jesus the mercenary, Jesus the social reformer, Jesus the social conserver—to name but a few.” (Peter Rollins, The Idolatry of God, intro) In our own US history, the Bible was invoked by both the North and the South in the civil war. Jesus was the liberator, who set the captive free. But the New Testament was also quoted to justify slavery and to keep slaves in line.

Mark is always ready to challenge us. Would we recognize Jesus if we met up with him? Would we line up with him or would we oppose him? Would we “take offense” at him as his own village did? When he comes disguised as a refugee fleeing violence, will we offer him a cup of cool water? Will he say to us, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me?” Or will he say, instead, “I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” (Matthew 25)

What will he say to us? I wonder about that, because neither group remembered ever seeing Jesus in those conditions. What would Jesus tell us if he stood up here in this pulpit? Would we follow, or would we take offense? Would we recognize him?

I read a disturbing opinion piece this week—which comes first, our religious convictions, or our political convictions? While we would hope that our religious convictions would shape our politics, the conclusion from the essay was that for the majority of people, their political convictions did more to shape their religion than the other way around. The premise was this: Since young people form political convictions at about the same time that they also drift from their childhood faith, their political convictions would then influence their choice of

church—including the option of no church at all. (Michele Margolis, When Politicians Determine Your Religious Beliefs, NY Times, July 11, 2018)

What would Jesus tell us if he stood up here in this pulpit? Would we follow, or would we take offense? Would we recognize him? Frankly, this is a question whether you are Republican or Democrat, whether you're conservative or liberal. I read a story of a minister who, one week, got two e-mails objecting to the exact same sermon on poverty. The first accused him of being an extreme right-winger for his views on poverty. The second, regarding the exact same sermon, accused him of being an extreme left-winger. What would Jesus tell us if he stood up here in this pulpit? Would we follow, or would we take offense? Would we recognize him?

Oddly enough, Jesus could do no deeds of power there in Nazareth. Our reaction to Jesus matters. The story of Jesus's rejection at Nazareth is followed closely by Jesus sending the disciples out two by two, giving them authority over the unclean spirits, and telling them to take nothing for their journey. He warns them that they, too, may be rejected. This after they have seen their teacher and mentor also rejected, and seen him incapacitated by the people's lack of faith. "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," Mark tells us.

God knew what he was doing, when he used Mark to write the story of Jesus. God knew, that just like the villagers of Nazareth, we would not always recognize Jesus because of our pre-conceived notions of how he ought to behave—who he ought to be. This story is included for our instruction.

God knew, too, that we would sometimes fail, sometimes the good news of the reign on God would fall on deaf ears. That without this warning from Jesus, or without this one example of Jesus's inability to do deeds of power, we might be tempted to give in and give up.

Whoever we are, and however long we have been followers, it's important for us to continue to search the Scripture and learn from Jesus. We will make mistakes. As we continue in our study of Mark, we will see the disciples making

more and more mistakes in understanding Jesus and his mission. Still Jesus continued to teach them and lead them and send them out to proclaim the good news. The good news of the kingdom of God.

“Repent!” they cry. Turn away from every other allegiance, let your mind be transformed, and give your full allegiance to the God revealed in this Jesus of Nazareth in the Galilee. The story of Jesus continues today. I pray that we all learn to recognize him, that we do not reject him or his ways, and that we have the courage to follow where he leads.