

In our reading from Mark, our lectionary has us concluding a three week series that is answering the question “Who is Jesus?” You may recall that two weeks ago, the disciples were hunkered down in their fishing vessel, terrified that a storm would swamp them and Jesus was sleeping right through it. Upon awaking, to the disciples amazement, he calmed the sea. Last week, Jesus heals a hemorrhaging woman and brings back to life a dying little girl. Like last week, this week we have two stories, the first where Jesus’ neighbors fail to understand who he is, and sending the apostles out two by two to proclaim the Gospel, cast out demons and anoint the sick.

In the story where Jesus calms the sea, Mark is showing that Jesus is sovereign over the created order and that he is co-equal with the Creator. In last week’s stories, Mark is showing that Jesus has authority over life and the law, that he is the source of healing. In today’s story, he is sharing his authority to cast out demons, having power over evil spirits. As such, he shares equally God’s authority in heaven. And how does Jesus

exercise his authority? He does it with gentleness and compassion to those who come to faith.¹

Faith is a central portion of all these stories. In all these stories, Jesus' faith, and the faith he is commending is an absolute and obedient faith in God. He puts his trust in God's values and norms rather than in human constructs of normative behavior and ways of being. It is tremendously difficult to break out of societal expectations and group mores and yet this is what God expects.

Let's look at what's happening in today's Gospel. Jesus has developed quite a following around the Sea of Galilee. Crowds follow him everywhere. At first, the hometown crowd is impressed. Look at him! See how wise he is! Look at the deeds of power that come from his hands! And then they consider: wait a minute, isn't this Mary's kid? Didn't I clean his snotty nose? Wasn't he the one who scuffled in the streets with his brothers? Doesn't he work with his hands for a living? Don't we know his entire family for generations? Who does he think he is?! No way is he anything special! And their skepticism is so profound that Jesus could not

¹ Mark D. W. Eddington, *Theological Perspective, Feasting on the Word Year B, volume 3*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds; (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009, 212,4,6.

do any deeds of power, except heal a few people. Apparently, without faith, even Jesus has very human limitations. In this case, Jesus' neighbors very familiarity with him, blinded them to who he really is. They were not able to see past their perception of where Jesus fit in the social order, or their perceived place of him in the world.

For me, the most similar type of thing that I can think of in the recent past is a darker, more negative example. I'm thinking of the serial rapist and murderer of young, female college students, the most recent being a student at UVA. His coworkers, neighbors and family all couldn't believe that the accused was capable of these terrible crimes. He's a great co-worker, a thoughtful and helpful man, a dutiful son according to them. And as someone who doesn't know him, I think: "how could these people not see him for who he is? There had to be signs!" Perhaps as our Gospel reading indicates, people saw what they expected to see. And other evidence to the contrary they simply ignored or even found too threatening to contemplate.

And then there's the story about the apostles. By this point in their collective journey together, the apostles are beginning to get an inkling of just who this Jesus is. They are beginning to understand that God's way is

different from man's way, and that God's way is infinitely better. They can see that Jesus has absolute and obedient faith in God, and from that comes his authority. It is from this kind of faith that authority is derived and Jesus empowers the apostles to exercise the same kind of ministry as he does. He charges them with proclaiming the Gospel, healing the sick, and casting out demons. He tells them to take with them the clothes on their backs and a walking stick. That's it. This conveys a sense of urgency to their mission and is meant to remind us of the passover journey the Israelites took out of Egypt. In both instances, the journey is immanent and urgent. He instructs them to stay in the first house that welcomes them: no shopping around for a softer bed or a better meal. He let's them know that they aren't responsible for the outcome of their efforts. If they aren't welcome, no worries. Shake the dust off and move on to where you are welcome. Just like Jesus did. Where faith is present, Jesus can affect a positive change. And so can the apostles. And so can we.

So the question for us as a community is how can we be more like the apostles and less like the hometown crowd. Are we willing to consciously question our assumptions, the stories we tell about ourselves and to try and bring our blind spots into the full light of day for examination?

Are we willing to have absolute and obedient faith in such a way that we amaze and stun those around us, those who are expecting us to act differently and more in accordance with anticipated behavior? I thinking about the example the Pennsylvania Amish community set before the nation several years ago when a shooter gunned down school children in their school and they forgive him within days. It was so unusual and unexpected an action it was international news. In the same way, the families of those slain at Emanuel AME Church in Atlanta have forgiven the shooter. We don't expect that. Cries for revenge and justice are expected and completely understandable. Not that forgiveness precludes justice. It's just that forgiveness is hardly imaginable in this circumstance and yet, they did it because of their faith. They have shown us what the Kingdom of God is like even in the face of unspeakable evil. So the challenge before us is how do we at Ascension walk the walk that matches our talk? What do we need to do that gets us closer to being Apostles with a full share in Jesus' ministry and away from being like the home town crowd? Let's think about it in the week ahead and share our responses with one another.