

“If We Only Knew What He Said”

Mark 6:1-6a

19th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville

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I’m going to start this morning with a pop quiz.

Do you remember the person who wrote these words?

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”¹

You think I cannot see you, but I know some of you are saying to yourself right now, Robert Frost.

And you are correct.

By no stretch of the imagination am I a scholar of Robert Frost.

But I know enough about him to know that his home life growing up was not easy, often difficult.

He had a violent and erratic father, who died when Frost was 11, leaving the family with eight dollars.²

And so even in that famous quote by Frost, there is history, there are ghosts, there are, at best, ambivalent feelings about home.

I wonder how Jesus felt about going home.

Mark tells us that Jesus has had a very successful ministry in the first five chapters of his Gospel. He’s healed people, he’s cast out demons, he’s got a group of loyal followers.

¹ From “The Death of the Hired Man,” by Robert Frost, in “The Road Not Taken: A Selection of Robert Frost’s Poems,” introduction and commentary by Louis Untermeyer, New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1971.

² Alfred Kazin, “God and the American Writer,” New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

And then he returns home.

After teaching in the synagogue, the response from his home congregation was clear:

“Where did this man get all this?”

“What is this wisdom that has been given to him?”

“Is not this the carpenter...?”

We know his family!

And they took offense at him, Mark tells us.

The Greek word here is scandalizo.

In other words, “they were scandalized” by what Jesus had to say that day.

The most literal sense of the word is that they stumbled when they heard what Jesus said that day.

I wonder what Jesus said that day?

If we only knew what he said...

Luke tells the story a bit differently. In that Gospel, Luke tells us that when Jesus went back home, he spoke about God’s grace coming to outsiders, to Gentiles, to people who were not a part of Jesus’ own community or country.

And it enraged his hometown synagogue so much, a mob formed and they tried to kill Jesus.

That’s what Luke says.

Mark tells us none of that.

Mark just says that the people back home were scandalized by what Jesus taught them.

If only we knew what he said...

What do you think Jesus said that got his home synagogue so stirred up?

While you're trying to imagine with me what Jesus might have said that day, maybe we ought to consider WHY he would have said whatever it was that he said.

Let's assume, for a moment, that Jesus knew what he was doing. Knew that he was going to be provocative.

As Flannery O'Connor once put it, "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."

The late Southern Baptist preacher Will Campbell once told how years and years ago, there was another country Baptist preacher named Thad Garner—a good friend of Campbell's—and Thad Garner was invited to speak on a radio talk show.

As he was driving to the show, Garner listened to callers bombard the hostess of the show with questions about Johnny Cash. Why Johnny Cash? Well, Johnny Cash had been on national television the night before, and he had used a BAD WORD.

So Thad Garner knew that as soon as he was on the radio, as soon as he was introduced as a preacher, people would be calling in left and right to get HIS opinion on the BAD WORD that Johnny Cash had used.

Sure enough, the first caller was on the line:

“I want to ask your guest what he thinks about Johnny Cash using ugly language on TV. Since he’s a preacher, I think I know what he’ll say.”

But before the hostess could respond, Thad jumped in.

“I don’t know, ma’am. What did he say?”

The caller was silent. Then she stammered out, “Wellll...I can’t repeat it. It was a bad word and I don’t say bad words.”

“I understand, ma’am,” Thad said quickly. “I’m glad you don’t say bad words. Now, I’ll tell you what. I know some bad words, so I’ll call them out one by one, and you tell me ‘yes’ or ‘no’ if that’s what he said. Okay? Here goes....”

And while one of the studio workers kept his finger REAL CLOSE to the four second delay button, Thad began.

“Did he say, ‘death’?” Thad was speaking softly now.

“Welll...no.”

“Very good. Did he say ‘nuclear war’?”

“Welllll...no!” The caller was clearly getting irritated.

“Very good. Did he say ‘electric chair’?”

And instead of an answer, the sound of a telephone SLAMMING was heard on the other end.”³

³ Will D. Campbell, *Forty Acres and a Goat: A Memoir*, Oxford, Mississippi: Jefferson Press, 2002.

Thad Garner had stepped on that caller's toes!

I wonder what Jesus said that stepped on so many toes in his hometown long ago.

We don't know.

What we do know that this was NOT the only time he got under other people's skin.

I said at the start that Jesus had had a successful ministry up to this point...but I left a couple scenes out when I said that to you. You see, if you read the Gospel of Mark carefully, Jesus pretty much offends EVERYONE at some point along the way.

We all know about the Pharisees.

At the beginning of chapter 3 in Mark's Gospel, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the sabbath.

And what do the Pharisees do?

Mark writes:

"The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."

But it wasn't just the religious leaders who were having trouble with Jesus.

Do you recall what happens later on in chapter 3 of Mark?

Picking up in verse 19:

"Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.'"

His very own family...tried to restrain Jesus?
 The crowd, the people...thought Jesus was losing his mind??!!

And it's only two chapters after today's text, that Jesus tells his disciples that "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected...and be killed..."

And Peter hears that, and HE thinks that Jesus is losing his mind.
 He gets so upset that he begins to rebuke Jesus.
 And Jesus replies: "Get behind me, Satan!"

Before the Gospel of Mark is half-way over, Jesus has gotten under EVERYBODY'S skin!

All of which begs a question.
 When has Jesus ever gotten under your skin?
 When has Jesus been the difficulty, the challenge for you?
 When has Jesus offended YOU?
 What would Jesus have to say to us, for you and me to be scandalized by him?

You see, it's hard for me to get there.
 It's hard for me to be offended by Jesus, because I always find a way to talk myself out of it.

For example, it's stewardship season.

And Jesus spent a LARGE portion of his ministry talking about money. About the need to share our money. About the need to not make a god out of our money.

Remember what Jesus said to the rich man in chapter 10 of Mark's Gospel?

“You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

And when the rich man heard those words, he was shocked.

Jesus had just caused that rich man—who was faithful, by the way, followed all the commandments—Jesus had just caused him...to stumble.

Now I’ve preached on that story of Jesus and the rich man many times. I’ve even preached it during stewardship season. And I’ve never preached that text in such a way that it’s caused the congregation I was serving to stumble. Why? Because I don’t want congregations that I serve to stumble.

I want them to succeed.
Just like I want to succeed.

And so I treat that particular text, Jesus and the rich man, in such a way that it’s a prod, a push, a gentle nudge to grow in our generosity.

And I tell myself, that’s not a bad way to hear that text.
Treat the text as an invitation to be a bit more generous.
And then I can go home and feel good about that text.

Of course, that ALSO keeps me from being offended by that text. Which I don’t mind one bit, because if I’m not feeling offended by Jesus, if I’m NOT feeling like Jesus really has gotten under my defenses and exposed something about me that I do not want to look at...if none of that happens, then I don’t have to change.

And that’s probably, deep down, my true goal.

To fight Christ's call to change.

Have you ever resisted Christ's call to change?

Jesus's call...to give up that which you have turned into an idol?
 To let go of that which we do not want to let go...
 It may be something different for each of us.

It could be our money or possessions.
 It could be our patterns and habits and routines.
 It could be a grudge.
 It could be our sense of righteous anger.
 It could be our sense of entitlement.
 It could be our need to have control.

Maybe that's why Mark didn't tell us what Jesus said to his hometown crowd. Because if he had told us, we could just say, well, that was THEIR problem, but it's not MY problem.

No need to change.

And that's not what Jesus wants. What would Jesus have to say to us, in order to both OFFEND you and me and...to help us see our need to change?

The writer David Sedaris tells a story of when he was eight years old and moved to a new town. His family moved into a house on a street with the Tomkeys. The Tomkeys were the only family on the block that didn't own a TV.

Instead of a TV, the Tomkeys had a boat, and on the weekends, they would leave town and head for the lake.

One year, when Halloween came, David and his sisters dressed up and went from house to house collecting candy. The next night, November 1st, as David and his family sat watching TV, the doorbell rang.

David, his mother, and sisters all went to answer it, and there, on their doorstep, stood the Tomkeys. The parents were dressed normally and the two children were in Halloween costumes. The father explained that they had spent the weekend at the lake, so the children had not been able to trick or treat.

“I guess we’re trick or treating now, if it’s not too late.”

“Of course it’s not too late,” David’s mother said. Then she told her children to go and get the candy.

“The candy’s all gone,” one of David’s sisters said. “We gave it all out last night.”

“Not that candy,” their mother replied. “The *other* candy.”

“Do you mean *our* candy?” another sister asked.

“The candy we earned?”

The children knew this is what their mother must mean, especially when she fixed them with that look that only a mother can give. They hurried off to their bedrooms.

In his room, David grabbed the brown paper bag marked:

“My Candy. Keep Out.”

He dumped it on his bed and started searching for the crummiest candy, the only things he would even consider giving away. As he divided his candy into piles according to what he liked best, he knew

that any minute his mother would come into his room and start grabbing, indiscriminately, whatever candy she could give to the Tomkeys.

Then it occurred to David—the only thing to do was to eat as much candy as he could, right then and there. So he started unwrapping the miniature chocolate bars and cramming them into his mouth.

Moments later, his mother entered the room.

As his mother grabbed a roll of Necco wafers,
he pleaded with her, “Not those. Not those.”⁴

We all have our candy, don't we?
We all have some part of our lives that we do not want to let go.
Even when it gets in the way of our relationship with our neighbor
and our relationship with God, we still hold onto it so TIGHT!

So maybe this text from Mark isn't really about Jesus going back to his home. Maybe it's about Jesus entering my home and entering your home.

Because home doesn't have to be a place.
It can also be a mindset.
A mindset that says...I'm fully baked, this is who I am.
A mindset that says...I can settle in for the remainder, make my life as comfortable as possible...I have no more need to grow.

You see, my question is not what Jesus said that day in his home synagogue long ago.

⁴ David Sedaris, *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*, New York: Little, Brown, & Company, 2004.

My question is what you and I will say.

When Jesus comes into our home, and asks us to change something in our life, asks us to let go of something we never pictured letting go of...when Jesus asks us to serve him in a way we never imagined serving him before...maybe OFFENDING us in the process...

what will we say?

Amen.