

Our passage today picks up where we left off last week—and it's kind of a turning point in our journey through Mark's gospel.

For the past several weeks, our passages have focused on the power and authority of Jesus to bring people to health and wholeness and to challenge the Jewish and Roman leadership. The stories are iconic: A man is lowered through the roof to Jesus and is healed. Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Jesus calms a storm. Jesus heals the Gerasene demoniac. Jesus cures both Jairus daughter and the woman with a hemorrhage. Jesus challenges the authority of the Jewish leadership by flaunting Sabbath laws and eating with sinners. His power is known throughout the region and crowds follow him everywhere. The rapid fire telling of these stories lends a sense of urgency to his ministry in Galilee and heightens the sense that God is doing a new thing through Jesus.

And then we come to Nazareth.

Immediately after leaving the house of Jairus where he has just brought life back to the little girl he goes home—home being Nazareth. He stands up to speak in the synagogue and to say that people are surprised is putting it mildly. Those who are there to hear him speak are offended by him, it seems, for having the audacity to speak in the synagogue (even though it was common practice that anyone could speak there.) It doesn't even seem to be because of *what* he is saying; in fact we don't know *what* he said because Mark doesn't record his interpretation of scripture here. We might take a clue by looking at other gospel version of this scene, Luke 4:16-30, where words are recorded. Jesus reads from Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* Then Jesus basically says, *I am the one that Isaiah was talking about in these well-known words about the Messiah.*

But even though he has healed many people and done great works of power to the people gathered in the Nazarene temple he is still the *son of Mary* who is best known in their context for working with his hands. He grew up in their homes and played with their children—or perhaps were peers with some of them. *Their* Jesus saying these things? Never!

I remember several years ago reconnecting with one of my best friends from elementary school on Facebook. She and I and two other girls were called “the belly showers” because we wore hip-hugger pants and tied our shirts up, leaving our stomachs showing. Well, it was the 70s! We were best friends and spent the night at each others' houses and rode the bus together and hung out at recess. I have really good memories of those girls, so I was excited to reconnect with Karen.

I hadn't seen or talked to Karen in years, so I was also surprised to find out that she holds a doctorate in some kind of science but is now a romance novelist. I shouldn't have been surprised—a love of books was something we all shared—but I was. Partly because I didn't know what she had been up to, but partly because, well, I *knew* her at one time but I *didn't know* that she liked to write as well as read.

But the surprise of Jesus' hearers turns to offense. They are offended by the very fact of him standing up in front of them to speak. Again, I think it's a question of authority: *what gives him the right?* I can imagine them thinking. *Who is he, who works with his hands, to claim to be a healer? Who is he, son of Mary, whose brothers and sisters we know, to speak in this temple, in this manner? What right does he have?*

It is the same question that underlies the questioning of the Pharisees: what right does Jesus have and by what power does he heal, does he question the authority of the temple and the law? Who does he think he is anyway?

And he was amazed at their unbelief, and he could do very few works of power there.

He went on from there to other towns and in the meantime sent out the 12 disciples in pairs, giving them power to heal and cast out demons. (This is story number 2 in our passage for today.) Jesus himself is able to continue healing and preaching and teaching, and sends his disciples to do the same. And they are able, as we read in the text, to cast out many demons and cure many who were sick.

A question that comes to me and may come to you at this point is, why could Jesus do works of power before going to Nazareth, and why could he do them after, but why not in Nazareth itself?

One explanation I read said that it wasn't that Jesus *couldn't* do works of power while in Nazareth, but that the lack of faith of the people made him not want to. Perhaps this is so; perhaps he was more discouraged by the rejection of the community that raised and nurtured him than he was by rejection by strangers and Pharisees, and so he held back from working miracles for this reason. Perhaps he was hurt or angry at being put down by the people who were supposed know him best and a very human resentment kept him from living into his divine self at this time. Perhaps the atmosphere of unbelief polluted his abilities and he was unable to make use of his power.

But his power doesn't go away forever and, furthermore, he is able to pass it on to his disciples. They go on to spread his message of peace and justice, to heal people and bring hope where there previously had been little or none.

As usual we also want to ask why these stories were recorded by Mark and what do they mean for us today? I can imagine that Mark recorded these two stories for a couple of reasons. First, to move the story along and give it some contrast. He would want his readers to keep reading, right? An endless series of miraculous healings and challenges to religious authority might be tempting to write, but as Crash Davis says in *Bull Durham* "strikeouts are fascist and besides that they're boring." In other words, to make things interesting for the crowd (or the reader) things need to be changed up a little from time to time. So from a literary point of view, having Jesus go home and be rejected and unable to do any miracles makes the story interesting and continues the action. Second, it would be a way to encourage his readers, who were struggling to become a church community themselves. In Mark's gospel we read that Jesus had power but that he also struggled—but he perseveres. His powers return and through the ministry of the disciples the good news continues to spread.

We can also take a similar message from these passages, especially in today's religious climate. The church, the larger church, has had periods of growth and decline over the ages and we are currently in a period of decline. There are lots of theories why, and we've talked about some of them in session and bible studies and worship; but the truth is it's a complex issue that doesn't have an easy answer.

What we do know is that Jesus struggled at times just as we do. As we struggle in community to reach the people around us in a climate of indifference, as we struggle as individuals to keep our faith in the face of tragedies near and far, we can look to Jesus the Christ and know that he wasn't always successful either. And yet he persevered and moved on to places where he was more accepted and was more successful. He didn't stay in Nazareth and try to make things happen; and he instructed his disciples to move on from any place that didn't accept them.

Here at Community of Faith we are facing a decision about the property and building. As we continue to discern we can look to this passage to help us in this process—both in terms of knowing that sometimes our ministry doesn't work in a specific place and that's ok; as well as in seeing that perseverance is key to the health and growth of our ministry. We must persevere in our ministry—our worship, our mission to Nicaragua and CLASP and Cornerstone and other places; but we must not allow ourselves to be discouraged by the fact that our property may not be helping us in our ministries anymore.

Please know that I'm not saying this to upset you all; I love this place but I love you all more and I love the work that we do together in the name of Jesus Christ. And I see that keeping things up here is getting harder and harder and so I have to ask hard questions and say things that may be hard to hear. I'd much rather we continue as a congregation somewhere else than spend all of our energy keeping up a property that doesn't suit our congregation anymore.

Jesus knew when it was time to shake the dust off of his feet and move on. He also knew that one town that rejected him didn't mean the end of his ministry, it was only a blip on God's overarching plan for his life and work. Is it time for us to do the same? I can't answer that by myself, but I think it is worth talking about. Amen.