

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

July 4, 2021, The 6th Sunday After Pentecost/The 13th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 48:1-3, 9-14; Mark 6:1-6a

SCANDALIZED AND STUMBLING?

Today's story in Mark has gotten me thinking about what happens at the beginning of the school year, or the beginning of a sports season.

I'm sure many of you have either had the experience, or been witness to the experience of what happens when teachers or coaches are meeting everyone for the first time.

As they work their way through the class list, or as each person introduces themselves, teachers or coaches, pastors or youth pastors have been known to say:

"I know exactly who you are, I had your brother/your sister, in my class, on my team, in my youth group a few years ago." Or they'll say, "Oh, I remember you, I knew you when you were young."

And everyone gathered can usually tell by the teacher's tone of voice what kind of sibling they think you had, or what kind of family they think you came from, or what they think your reputation used to be.

You often hear either the hopeful joy of having another good person in the classroom or on the team,

or the hesitant fear and growing resentment of having to deal with another one of those children from that family.

And for those of you this happened to, can you remember what it felt like to be prejudged before someone got to know one thing about you?

Whether you were expected to live up to the good grades or athletic or artistic abilities of a sibling,

or you had to prove you weren't a trouble maker like your brother or sister,
or like you had been in the past,
you started off at a disadvantage.

It was as if the people who said they "knew exactly who you were" were boxing, or caging you in. And you knew,

with that sinking feeling,
that once again you would have to work really hard to be seen for yourself.

And sometimes no matter what you did, those teachers, coaches or pastors
were never going to see you for yourself anyway.

Jesus had this kind of experience when he went to Nazareth, his hometown. He had been teaching and preaching and healing throughout the region, and then he went home.

It was the tradition in Sabbath worship, that a portion of Torah, the scriptures, were read and then it was explained by a Rabbi.

Since Jesus was a visiting Rabbi, or teacher, he would have been asked to be the one who spoke that day.

The people of his hometown had of course been hearing about the miracles he was doing, they'd heard that when he taught crowds gathered,

they'd heard that he'd been healing the blind, those who couldn't walk, the deaf.

And now he was home, and they gathered to hear him on the Sabbath.

At first people were surprised by him, they were amazed at what he was teaching. But the longer he talked the harder it was to respect what he was saying.

“Who does he think he is,” they thought? We’ve known him since he was toddler, and then a young boy running with the other children through the streets of Nazareth.

We watched him grow up in his father’s carpenter shop, until he himself became the carpenter.

“This is Mary and Joseph’s son, his brothers and sisters are all around us,
 Who does he think he is? It’s offensive to have him act like something he’s not!
 Why does he think he has any right to speak to us like this?
 We knew him when he was young, we know his family now,
 He’s just a carpenter, what does he know about religion?”

Mark says that Jesus could do no miracles there in Nazareth, he was only able to cure a few people who were sick.

No blind ones got their sight back, no deaf ones could hear, the beggars at the side of the road still couldn’t walk, and the good news of God’s kingdom and inclusive love were cut short by people who would not hear.

In the 3rd verse of this passage, when Mark writes that the people took offense at Jesus, the literal translation of this word from the Greek says that the people stumbled over Jesus. The Greek word *skandalidzo*, is the word we get the words scandal, and scandalized from.

The people tripped over the person that Jesus had become;
 they were scandalized that this carpenter was trying to teach them about God.

And Jesus ended up leaving Nazareth amazed at their unbelief.
 It must have been such a bewildering experience for Jesus.

He had come home with so much to tell them about the kingdom of God,
 and so much to do for those trapped by illness.

There were so many ways he could help and change their lives
 by inviting them to come closer to their God.

But people couldn’t let him be who he really was. They could only see who he had been, and who his family was.

And so, Jesus left the town he had been raised in, saying: “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.”

He went out into the countryside around the Sea of Galilee with the good news of God’s love and with God’s gift of healing in his hands and heart.

And he gave those gifts away to people who were eager
 to hear God’s words and receive God’s love.

As I spent time with this story this week, I started to wonder what would happen if Jesus was to come to us, here in our sanctuary and begin to teach us about the kingdom of God.

What would he say to us, who are in our 16th month of the pandemic;
 we, who have lived through months of political and racial unrest and division?

What would Jesus want to say to us here, who are battered and bruised by these last 16 months, we who are divided by many things as we come together into this sanctuary to worship God?

While its more comfortable to think that we'd never do anything as closed-minded as the people of Nazareth, I'm not sure if that is the truth.

I have a suspicion that followers of Jesus have not stopped stumbling over him yet; that I have not stopped stumbling over him yet. As I spent time with this story, I realized that we in the Christian church are the people of Nazareth now. We here in this family of faith are Jesus' hometown now. We battered and bruised and grieving and divided people are Jesus' hometown.

This story comes to us with powerful questions about how we are living and speaking and acting in this season of change we are living in. Like the people of Nazareth, like those teachers and coaches and pastors many of us have experienced, do we think we already have Jesus all figured out because we knew him before the pandemic? We knew him before the last election and the most recent political and racial unrest?

These 16 months have raised many questions for people about faith, about who God is, about what God does and doesn't do, about how we are to live as people of faith in what often feels like a divided and fractured landscape.

I believe we are being faithful followers of Jesus when we check in on ourselves from time to time, individually and as a church family, and this story of Jesus in Nazareth is inviting us to do that this morning.

Do we come in the sanctuary doors knowing exactly how we'll experience Jesus this Sunday,
because we know all about him,
because we know his family, his story, and what he is like,
and what his followers are like?

Do we come in and sit down on Sunday morning, knowing exactly what we'll believe about Jesus when we leave
because the message never changes, and we've heard those old stories before,
and we believe exactly as we did as a child, just like our parents before us,
and it was good enough for them,
and it's good enough for us too?

Do we come in the door knowing exactly how much Jesus will expect of us when we leave,
because we already know all about ourselves as his followers?

Basically, I think it comes down to this,
The gospel of Jesus Christ is scandalous, it is not always comforting or comfortable,
it asks a lot of us,
it takes a lifetime of continuous practice to be a follower of Jesus Christ.
The Gospel of Jesus Christ will ask us to change...and then change again,
as we are shaped more and more by our God.

But I don't think it's such a bad thing to stumble over Jesus,
or be scandalized by what he is saying to us.
Because, when we're tripping over Jesus,
and unsettled by what he is saying to us,
when we feel ourselves changing as a church and as individuals,
when we have days of thinking: "Who does this Jesus think that he is?",
and let even that question change us,

Then we are being faithful, stumbling, followers of Jesus Christ,
who are listening and hearing,
and being challenged and changed;
who are being loved and used to love and serve others,
even and especially those we never expected to love or serve,
by our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ, will always reach out for us when we stumble,
and put us back on our feet,
so we can continue to follow him on the life-long path of faith.