

There's No Place Like Home

There are no more severe critics than the people from your hometown or the neighborhood where you grew up. That's understandable because these people not only know you but they remember your successes and your failures. You may have undergone some tremendous changes in your life since you were young but the impressions made when we are young are hard to overcome. That's especially true when you have been gone for a while.

Can you imagine the stir it caused when Jesus came back into Nazareth after having been gone for some time? After all, he had been healing the sick, casting out demons, teaching and confronting the religious leaders. Word must have filtered back to his hometown. Not only that, when Jesus came to Nazareth it was not just for a social visit. He had an entourage following him. Disciples surrounded him and it must have seemed to the people that the young man who had grown up in front of them as the son of a carpenter must be something special.

On the Sabbath Jesus began to teach in the synagogue. Mark tells us that the people were amazed. He was not a Rabbi, he was the carpenter, he was the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon and he had a number of sisters. How dare he take center stage! What gives him the right to teach?

They were offended by what he was doing. And Jesus was subdued. He said, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor." (Mark 6:5). Because of their unwillingness to believe, Jesus could not do much among them. He was shackled by their lack of faith.

Questions:

1. Can you relate at all to how the folks in his hometown were treating Jesus? How hard would it be for you to go home again? Do people remember things for which you are embarrassed? Do they treat you like you are still a teenager?
2. Mark tells us that Jesus could not do any miracles there because of their lack of faith. In fact, he was amazed at their lack of faith. Does that passage make any difference to Christians today? In what ways?

For further study:

3. Read about synagogue worship in a good Bible Dictionary. What place was Jesus taking when he "taught?" Why did they say, "Where did he get this wisdom?" How did that contradict the fact that he was a carpenter?

Traveling Light

It is hard to imagine what must have been going through the minds of the disciples each day. They have been with Jesus as he went from village to village, teaching and healing, but now he is sending them out. Considering their previous occupations this was a very daunting task. They must have had a million questions. “You are sending us out with the authority to cast out evil spirits – how are we supposed to do that?” We feel the same way sometimes. We are to win the lost – how? We are told to have compassion on those less fortunate – how? We are to be light in a very dark world – how?

Most of what Jesus tells them will mean more when they are actually on their journey. He tells them to travel light. It is really a call for faith that God will take care of all their needs on the journey. The normal reaction when you are called on to go somewhere or to do something important is to be as prepared as possible. Our security sometimes comes from how much we can control the situation. Jesus tells his disciples not to take bread, bags, or money. Incredible. How would they eat? What about necessary supplies? You always need money, don’t you? When you think about it, what Jesus instructs the disciples to do makes sense. The more you have, the more you have to take care of. Jesus does not want the disciples to concentrate on food, clothing, supplies, or security. They have a mission and the mission must come first (see Matthew 6:25-31). “Stuff” weighs us down and demands our attention. Jesus wants his disciples focused on the task.

Also, they are not to take rejection too personally. Jesus is sending them to the receptive. If people refuse to hear, the disciples are to shake the dust off their feet and move on. The next person might be ready to hear the message they are bringing. We get discouraged too easily sometimes. You may have tried to share the gospel with your co-worker in the past and failed. Don’t take it personally. You don’t know what God might do with the seed you planted. Just keep on sharing and encouraging. Don’t allow the reaction of others determine your actions.

Questions:

1. Why do you think Jesus sent out the disciples “two by two?” What might happen if a disciple were sent out by himself? Why not more than two?
2. How will God take care of the disciple’s needs on their journey? Does it surprise you that Jews might be hospitable to disciples of Jesus?
3. Think about what it means that “many demons were cast out,” and “sick people were anointed with oil.” Are people still afflicted by demons today? Is oil still an important part of healing the sick?

Killing the Messenger

Herod Antipas had reason to be upset with John the Baptist. John had been making it very clear that Antipas was wrong when he convinced Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, to leave her husband and to marry him. Antipas had put John into prison but this did not dull the grudge Herodias was nursing against the Baptist. She was out for revenge. Herod knew enough to fear this prophet of God. He did not take the rebuke personally; in fact he seemed to enjoy listening to John and knew him to be a righteous and a holy man.

Herodias, though, wanted revenge and she wanted the prophet's mouth to be shut forever. She finally had her opportunity at Herod's birthday banquet. Herodias' daughter, Salome, danced for the King and his guests. This so pleased the King that he offered to give the young lady anything she wanted. Herodias was prepared. "Ask for the head of John the Baptist." Salome did and even though it distressed Herod, he had John beheaded and the head was presented to the girl who in turn gave it to her mother. Herodias had succeeded in silencing the messenger.

We may be horrified that anyone would go to such limits to quiet someone who has pointed out some faults or who has called them to repentance, but the truth is that we sometimes avoid confrontations with the truth too. We may not try to remove the heads of the prophets, but we use more indirect approaches. We may avoid attending church or reading the Bible because we feel the pangs of conscience. Or we may avoid accountability because we don't like to be confronted with the truth about our actions. The irony of the story of John's death is that it is told in the context of the preaching, teaching, and healing of Jesus' disciples. You can kill the messenger, but you cannot kill the message. It will endure.

Questions:

1. Do you think Herod really believed that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead? If not, what did he mean by that statement?
2. Why do you think Antipas listened to John? Doesn't it seem odd to you since the message John preached was not favorable towards him?
3. List a few reasons why the story of John's the Baptist's death is included in the Gospels. What are we to learn from this story?

For further study:

4. Look up the Herods in a Bible Dictionary or encyclopedia. Try to trace their family history.

Bread of Heaven

This event in Jesus' ministry was so significant that it is one of the few miracles that is recorded in all four gospels. We have to be careful to remember the circumstances that surrounded this incredible miracle. The apostles had just returned from their mission to cast out demons and to heal the sick (6:6ff). Jesus wanted to spend some time with them but the press of the people was incredible. There were so many people coming and going that they didn't even have a chance to eat. They went to a solitary place, but the crowd followed. When Jesus saw the large crowd that had literally run to follow him, instead of being perturbed, he was filled with compassion. To him they were like sheep without a shepherd.

This is a very significant observation. Shepherds and sheep were a part of the fabric of Hebrew society. Sheep were basically helpless. They could not be left alone because they might eat some weed that would harm them, they might drink some brackish water and become sick, or they might just wander off from the rest of the flock. In other words, sheep need constant attention and constant care. So, the job of the shepherd was distinct and significant. One Old Testament prophet wrote that Shepherds should feed the sheep, bind up the wounded, and search for the lost ones (Ezekiel 35).

Jesus as the Good Shepherd could not ignore the sheep. He was not just concerned about their spiritual needs; he wanted to take care of their physical needs as well. It was late in the day. The people so wanted to hear Jesus that they had given no thought to their physical need for food. Jesus was not willing to send the people away to the surrounding villages. He fed them. He used the resources at hand. He miraculously multiplied those resources. Everyone was satisfied. And the leftovers from the five small loaves and two fish filled twelve baskets. The Shepherd fed his sheep and he would bind up their wounds and he would seek out the lost as well. What a Shepherd! What a Savior!

Questions:

1. In your opinion, what was the stronger draw, Jesus' teaching or Jesus' miracles? Can you get some clues for the answer from the other gospels?
2. Read Ezekiel 35 and Psalm 23 and list some more characteristics of shepherds. How did Jesus fill the tasks?
3. Why did Jesus tell the disciples to give the people something to eat? What do you think of their answer?
4. Why do you think Jesus multiplied the loaves and the fish instead of just creating some food for the people to eat?

Take Courage!

If the crowd was excited before the feeding of the 5000, you can only imagine what they were like afterward. Remember that before the crowd was fed, Jesus and his disciples were trying to go to a quiet place to rest and recover from their ministries. The disciples were dispatched to a boat which would take them to Gennesarat and from there they would go to Bethsaida to meet Jesus. Jesus stayed behind to pray. The Sea of Galilee is only about 8 miles across and is greatly affected by weather conditions. Evening came and they found themselves in the middle of the Sea. The crowds had disbursed and Jesus was alone on the shore. The disciples had been straining at the oars trying to get across the Sea, the wind was against them, and they must have been exhausted. The fourth watch of the night was from about 3 to 6 AM. During that time Jesus decided to cross the Sea by walking on the water. He would have passed them by but they noticed him. They thought he was a ghost! Whoever heard of anyone walking on water? They were terrified!

Jesus told his disciples to “Take courage and to not be afraid.” He climbed into the boat with them, the wind died down, and they were amazed. Mark tells us that they were amazed because they had not understood about the loaves. Their hearts were hardened. What did they not understand about the loaves? Did they not realize that a great miracle had happened? Surely they did. In fact, they were the ones who had passed around the food and who had gathered up the scraps. Maybe they did not understand who Jesus really was. If they really knew that he was the Son of God, would they have been so amazed to see him walking on water and causing the wind to die down? If they knew that Jesus was in the beginning with God and that all things were created through him and that he was God, they would have expected him to do almost anything.

We are like those disciples sometimes. Our expectations are low. We pray but have little faith. We are not really certain that God can do anything about our situation. And when he does, we are amazed. Maybe our hearts are too hard too. Maybe its time to, “Take courage and to not be afraid.” “The Master of ocean and earth and sky” intercedes for us!

Questions:

1. Why didn't Jesus cross the Sea in a boat? Is there any reason why he would wait until the fourth watch to walk on the water?
2. How does it affect you when you notice that Jesus went up on a mountainside to pray? Do you think that God's Son really needed to pray? What implications does his prayer life have for us today?
3. What prevented the disciples from understanding who Jesus really was? What caused their hearts to be hard?

How to Honor God

Pharisees! The name itself conjures up some very negative thoughts. But in reality, these folks were some of the most highly respected people of their time. They were the meticulous Law keepers. There were dead serious about making sure that they and everyone around them were serious about keeping the Law perfectly. The problem was that they confused keeping the Law with their interpretations of the Law and their traditions that surrounded the Law. Some people describe this as putting a fence or a hedge around the Law.

Our passage today tells about a time when some Pharisees and teachers of the Law, who had come from Jerusalem, noticed that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands in the way (ceremonially) that the Pharisees believed hands should be washed. They were appalled that the disciples would eat with unclean hands. "Why don't your disciples keep the traditions?" they asked Jesus. Jesus quoted Isaiah in response. "These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me." Traditions had become equal to and in some cases more important than keeping the Law! In fact, Jesus accused them of setting aside the commands of God to observe their traditions. Their traditions would sometimes keep them from having to deal with the demands of Scripture.

The bottom line for Jesus is the heart. Unclean hearts are much more disturbing than "unclean" hands. What is going on inside a person is much more significant than judging outward appearances. The things we are often so concerned with are minutia compared to the importance of ridding our hearts of "evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit..." Honoring God means that we are willing to be transformed from the inside out. It means that we are not satisfied with keeping a few rules or traditions. We want to be completely changed into his likeness. God has always wanted our hearts. He is not impressed by our interpretations and traditions. He is honored when we allow him to cleanse us and remake us. Now that is clean!

Questions:

1. See if you can discover where some of the Pharisees' cleanliness rules come from the Old Testament. Did they misinterpret, over-emphasize, or just create new rules from thin air?
2. Do people today "set aside the commands of God to observe [their] own traditions?" Explain.
3. Read verses 10-13. Explain how the Pharisees had avoided the Law requiring them to honor their Father and Mother.

Faith is the Victory!

Tyre is a Gentile city located in Phoenicia, which bordered Galilee on the North. Opposition was increasing and it may be that Jesus was simply trying to avoid any more publicity or conflict with the Jewish leaders. But word about Jesus had spread outside of Judea and Jesus was unable to keep his presences secret.

A distressed woman sought out Jesus. Her little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit. The woman fell at the feet of Jesus begging him to drive out the demon. The amazing thing is that this woman is not a Jew. She was born in Phoenicia and was Greek. She knew nothing about the Messiah but she knew that she needed help. Jesus' next statement is often misunderstood. It seems that Jesus is being harsh or is uncaring. He told the woman that he could not take the children's bread and feed it to the dogs. In other words, the plan of God was that the gospel first be preached to the Jews and then it would be spread to the Gentiles. What Jesus said makes sense. The woman probably knew nothing about God. She might have just viewed Jesus as a holy man or a prophet or priest of one of the Grecian gods. Casting out the demon might confuse the woman or mislead her into a false understanding.

Undaunted, the woman basically said that she would take even the crumbs that fell from the table. Jesus was amazed! What a reply! Matthew tells us that Jesus exclaimed, "Woman, you have great faith!" Jesus granted her request. The woman returned home and her child was free from her demonic possession.

It is important to compare our faith to the faith of this woman. She knew so little about Jesus. She may have known nothing at all about God, but she believed with all her heart that he could help her. What a contrast with those who should have believed, both then and now.

We have read too many self-help books and we have relied on our own power far too long. It is time to run to Jesus, to fall at his feet, to believe that he is the answer to our distress. How does your faith compare?

Questions:

1. What did it mean for a person to be possessed by an evil spirit? Was it a medical condition (like epilepsy) or a mental condition or did demons actually possess the bodies of people? Do demons possess people today?
2. Are you comfortable with the way that Jesus answered the woman? Why? Why not?
3. Why do you think the Holy Spirit wanted Christians to read this story about the Phoenician woman? What lessons can we learn about faith from this woman?

He Does Everything Well!

Jesus could not escape people who had problems. They seemed to follow him everywhere. He went to Tyre and even there he was recognized. He cast out a demon possessing a little girl and after he left to go back down to Galilee some people brought a deaf man to him who also was barely able to talk. They begged Jesus to heal the man. Matthew tells us that not only the deaf man with his friends had come to see Jesus, but people with all kinds of ailments crowded around him. The press of the crowd was so great and the pressure on Jesus so severe that it is not surprising that Jesus took the man aside, away from the crowd.

This is a very powerful point. Jesus did not miss seeing the people for the crowd. He missed seeing the crowd because he saw individuals. That is the way he was. Remember the woman with the flow of blood who reached out to touch Jesus' garment as he passed through a large crowd? Or what about blind Bartimaeus, crying out to be heard above the press of the people? Jesus saw people! So to give this poor deaf man his attention, he took him aside, touched his ears with his fingers, spit and touched the man's tongue and with a deep sign – say what – a deep sigh? Jesus sighed? Yes he did. It is not hard to imagine some reasons why.

He might have sighed because of the incredible number of hurting people in the world. He might have thought of how sin has so destroyed the perfect creation that was formed by him and the Father in the beginning. He might have been overwhelmed because of his physical limitations. Jesus was without sin, but he was not without emotion. He was tired. He was pressured by the crowds. He was concerned about the Jewish leaders. He was determined to do the will of the Father. So much to do and so little time, but the point of the story is that Jesus is willing to be bothered. He is willing to make one person the focus of his love for that moment. He was willing to address the pain and suffering of that poor deaf man. And that man went home hearing and talking plainly. He touched him and made him whole.

Jesus asked the people not to tell anyone about the people he healed, but they couldn't help but tell. They were amazed at this carpenter from Nazareth. The told everyone they saw, "He has done everything well." Indeed he has!

Questions:

1. Why did Jesus touch the man's ears and spit and touch his tongue? Did he need to do this to heal the man? Does the fact that Jesus "touched" the man have implications for Christians today?
2. Why does Mark give us the Aramaic word *ephaphtha*? Why doesn't he just translate it? Since he translates the word, what does that say about his original readers?
3. Why didn't Jesus want people to tell about the healings?

Here We Go Again!

Have you chased all your doubts away? Well, what are you waiting for? Maybe we are too much like Jesus' disciples. We forget! We forget how in the past God rescued us from difficult situations. We forget how he has answered our prayers to heal our loved ones. We forget, just like Peter, John and the rest of the disciples.

The scene is familiar. A large crowd had gathered. The crowd had been with Jesus three days and had nothing to eat. The Good Shepherd has compassion on them. He did not want to send them away hungry because they might collapse along the way. What a thought. They were so wrapped up in what Jesus was saying that the people in the crowd were not even concerned about eating.

When Jesus said he wanted to feed the people something should have clicked for the disciples but it didn't. They were so overwhelmed with the need of the moment that they could not remember the glory of the past! Are we like that? Sometimes I am. The disciples asked the Master, "Where in this remote place can anyone get enough food to feed them?" Did you catch that word – "anyone?" Anyone indeed! It was not just anyone who was standing right in front of them! The Creator of heaven and earth, the feeder of the 5000 was among them – but they forgot!

Jesus asked, "How many loaves do you have?" Something should have clicked! It didn't. "Tell them to sit down." No click. "He gave thanks." No click. "He gave the loaves to the disciples to distribute to the people." No click. "The people ate and were satisfied." No click. "Seven baskets full left over." No click! Even I am not that forgetful – or am I?

How many times do I have to be reminded that God will take care of all my needs if I seek him first? And yet I continue to worry. How many times do I have to be reminded that in all things God works for the good of those who love him? And yet, sometimes I become overwhelmed with the difficult things of life. Disciples haven't changed much, have they?

Questions:

1. What promises of God do you have a tough time remembering? What do you do to make sure that you don't forget what God has done in your life?
2. What does the word "compassion" mean?
3. How would you describe Jesus as a teacher? His disciples as learners? You as a disciple?

How Much Proof Do You Need?

Sometimes when people ask questions they are not searching for truth. Sometimes people ask questions to trip others up or to discredit a person. Sometimes people try to get a person to incriminate himself. Sometimes questions are just a sign that the questioner does not believe the one being questioned. The last statement is true in today's passage. The Pharisees questioned Jesus and one can only imagine what those questions were. After questioning him, they asked him for a sign to "test" him.

It is amazing that they asked for a sign. It was a clear indication that they did not believe in him. Is healing the sick not enough of a sign? How about feeding the 5000 and the 4000 – are they not enough of a sign? And casting out demons, whoever heard of anyone doing that? Even that would not suffice for these questioners. They were not seeking the truth; they were looking for some way to trap Jesus. They were seeking to discredit him.

Jesus wouldn't fall for their trap. He knew that they were being insincere. He saw their motives – how sad. Mark tells us that Jesus sighed deeply. He was emotionally distraught over what he saw in Israel's spiritual leaders. He sighed because of their unbelief and he probably also sighed over their haughty attitudes. They had not come for insight or understanding. They came to prove their point.

If I were Jesus at that moment I might have been tempted to give them an irrefutable sign – maybe the earth opening up and swallowing the doubters or fire from heaven. Jesus resisted though. He would not give them a sign. After all, in the future they will witness the raising of Lazarus from the dead, but they will not believe. There is really nothing that Jesus can do to soften their hard hearts. They are just like Pharaoh, who after witnessing the incredible power of God, could not bring himself to believe in God. Incredible! How do people become so conceited? How do hearts become so hard? How can people be so blind and yet think that they see so clearly? Faith is not a matter of physical proof. It is a decision a person makes. No amount of proof will ever cause a person to believe.

Questions:

1. Why were the Pharisees so adversarial against Jesus? Do they resemble any religious leaders you have known?
2. What kind of sign do you think the Pharisees wanted? Why wouldn't Jesus give them what they wanted?
3. Have you ever asked God for a sign? What advice would you give a fellow Christian who asked you about praying for a sign from God?