

The Inclusive Community

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 5, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Discipleship

Mark 6:1-13

Let us try to get a film or camera angle on today's passage. Where do we focus? The opening sentence in Mark 6 refers to Jesus coming to his home town and "his disciples followed him." Let us focus on the disciples. Let us put the camera in their midst so we see this literally from their viewpoint.

This is not the first visit home that Jesus makes in Mark's Gospel. The third chapter of Mark is quite descriptive of a failed visit before this. The disciples are with him then when two disturbing incidents sink the visit. He draws a large crowd but for some of the crowd he is a curiosity and for some of the crowd he is an enemy.

Those who see him as a curiosity have come to observe who he thinks he is after the celebrity status he is achieving. They conclude that he is crazy. In Mark's words "gone out of his mind." The curious group come determined to put him in his place. The enemies say he is possessed by a demon and that Satan is the source of his power to cast out demons.

Jesus does not answer the charge that he is insane. The charge came from his family, Mark says. Jesus tells his family that his real brothers, sisters and mother, are those who are attentive to God. He does counter the Satan charge by making two points. First, he says in effect that it is absurd to claim that Satan helps him cast out Satan. What sense does that make? Why would Satan give Jesus power to destroy Satan? Secondly, he insists his wondrous deeds are from God's Spirit in him because they are deeds of life. To call God's Spirit Satan is an offense against God. It is blasphemy. That comes from Satan.

Not a good visit. The disciples were there. Now that we have done this flashback, let us look at today's passage in chapter 6.

Jesus decides to go to Nazareth. As the disciples follow, they could not help but ask: why is he doing this? Of all the places he could go, why Nazareth, again? They do not deserve him. This is not going to be one of our favorite trips.

This time it is a Sabbath visit. The leader of the local synagogue, surprisingly, invites Jesus to speak. This is the synagogue where Jesus prayed as a boy and as a young man. The disciples wonder if things might go well. Maybe he had a point in coming back.

Mark says that Jesus begins to teach his hometown acquaintances and is doing well indeed. The disciples are delighted. The crowd is overwhelmed. Jesus outdoes himself, perhaps, wanting this visit to go better.

Mark tells us that the crowd reminds themselves, after a time, that this is the unimpressive boy they once knew. Just a carpenter's son. Just a son of Mary, a quite ordinary woman. "Son of Mary" is an insult since Jewish tradition required that the son be identified by his father's name. "Son of Mary" is a way of saying that Jesus is a nobody.

Now the disciples are nervous. It is not going well. No one is talking this time about insanity or demonic possession but this is not a friendly crowd after all. Jesus confronts the crowd and delivers one of his most famous lines: "Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown and among their own."

It's over. A second failure. He never goes back. It must have been devastating for Jesus. The rejection of your own, of those you thought would be friends, is the sharpest pain of all.

Mark adds that Jesus could not do the wondrous deeds he planned. Mark says starkly he "could not do" them. When Matthew writes a few years later, he softens that and says Jesus "did not do" wonders there. I think Mark has it right. He could not. He had no heart for it. They had no spirit for it. Jesus is not a magician. He does wonders if you let him. It's like love. It happens if you let it. But you have to have the heart and spirit for it.

Jesus now sends the twelve on a missionary journey on their own. He tells them to take nothing with them except the barest necessities. Stay focused Jesus tells them. You're not to travel with a lot of baggage. You're not celebrities. I had a lot going for me in Nazareth, and I was received as a celebrity. You see that this gets you nowhere. Go with next to nothing. Rely on only two things. Your relationship with one another. Travel two by two. And, depending on the hospitality of those who invite you into their homes. Their hospitality will show you they have the right spirit, a good heart. They will want to hear you.

The Gospel passage ends with the twelve gone and Jesus alone. He needs time to sort out what has happened to him.

The Nazareth rejection, twice, both times brutal, clarifies for him the future rejections he now anticipates.

The disciples learn what Jesus learns and what we must learn, namely, that the familiar often crowds out the miraculous. Distance lends enchantment. If Nazareth were not his hometown, Jesus would have reached it. But Nazareth made the terrible mistake we all do.

It assumed that because they knew Jesus, this was all he was – their knowledge of him, someone familiar and not exceptional,

Often when we know celebrities we are prone to use their first names when we meet them, making them familiar, less grand, more easily kept in line.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American essayist, poet, philosopher, once observed that if the stars came out at night only once in a millennium, we would stay awake all night, enchanted, overjoyed. Emerson observes that we get the stars every night. They become familiar. We hardly notice. We lose the heart and spirit to see the miracle.

Are we like that with the miracles in our lives? The fact that we are alive, that our spouse or friends or children are nearby. We dismiss the miracle and fret about an unkind word from someone or a fear about saving enough for retirement. Emerson's friend, Henry David Thoreau, observed that we spend our best years anxious about where we will be for the last years of our life, saving for the years when we may not be healthy, ignoring the years when we are healthy.

If God gets too close, we often miss God. If Jesus were a member of the Inclusive Community, we would take him for granted. Marriage is a miracle and we reduce it often to laundry and bills. Children are a miracle and we often dismiss them because we do not see eye to eye all the time. Summer is a miracle and we complain about the heat or the rain. We keep going back to Nazareth and join the crowd of those who dismiss the miracle of Jesus because they remember something he once said as a youngster that they did not like.

Jesus said elsewhere in the Gospel that if you make everything too familiar you will no longer believe in life after death or hear someone even if they come back to life and you see them.

The familiar is not the familiar, just the miraculous that we have reduced to an agenda, or a shopping list. Our homes are a miracle and all we see is the dust or the mortgage. We are friends, close friends, you and I, and so often we take that for granted.

Jesus could not do a miracle in Nazareth. If he did, they would not like how he did it anyway. They would criticize a miracle because it was given to the wrong person or at the wrong time or took too long to do.

When we substitute gratitude for taking things for granted, we lose our spirits, break the hearts of others and join the wrong crowd in Nazareth.

Let us not go there, my friends. There is no life there.