

“Christ Is About Something Larger”

When Jesus decided to return to his hometown of Nazareth, his decision placed him in a situation that challenged and tested him regarding his ministry. Upon entering Nazareth, Jesus is immediately placed under a microscope by the town folks. If truth be told, there are no more severer critics of any person than those who know you since childhood! Jesus' visit was never meant to be a social visit ... a visit to simply see his old friends and family. Jesus returns to Nazareth accompanied by his disciples ... that is to say ... Jesus returns to his hometown as a Rabbi. In Jesus' days, Rabbis moved about the country with their circle of disciples not necessarily attached to any one synagogue. So it was natural for Jesus upon entering Nazareth to go to the synagogue and teach. Unfortunately, Jesus' teachings are not well received ... in fact his sermon is met with great contempt. Quote: *They took offense at him*" which literally means *they stumbled or were scandalized ... more plainly they rejected him!*

The people of Nazareth were incensed that a person who came from such a simple, common background (*son of a carpenter*) would say such things as Jesus did. The old adage was in play: "familiarity breeds contempt." The people refused to listen to what Jesus had to say because they stereotyped him. How could such wisdom, such knowledge, such acts of power, such healing come from a person who was nothing more than a carpenter's son? They refused to believe Jesus and rejected him because ... he was born of common people. His family held no special place in the community, and thus Jesus was viewed as and labeled a commoner.

For that very reason, the people of Nazareth, who were looking for a mighty king of warrior stock, rejected him. Fortunately for us that is Jesus' glory. It is his glory because it means, when God came to earth clothed in Jesus, God claimed no exemptions. God took upon Himself the common life with all its common tasks. This teaches us that accidents of birth, fortune or pedigree have nothing to do with the character of a person. Also, we are made aware that we are ever tempted to evaluate people by externals and incidentals, rather than by their good human qualities ... such as integrity ... honesty ... humility.

Rejection by one's own family or community is a human experience that evokes sharp emotions like anger or self-pity or hurt. Within our own families, we know what it is like to be discounted, ignored, cast aside, shamed, and for some ... left out of the will! The consistent witness of the New Testament is that Jesus was rejected by his own people: the scribes, the Pharisees, other Galileans, but the ultimate was that *Jesus came to his own home town and his own people received him not*. The citizens of Nazareth rejected Jesus because, when measured by the criteria set by the world as to what a religious leader, worth his salt, ought to be, Jesus simply does not measure up. He is not successful enough or influential enough or prestigious enough to merit their wholehearted commitment. Therefore, their preconceptions lead them to dismiss him. Against this dark background the bright good news, ironically so, is that all who believe in Jesus Christ become children of God.

This scenario has direct relevance to today's church, because in the eyes of the world, the church constitutes the family of Jesus Christ. The result of the home town people's unbelief was that it diminished Jesus' capacity to do mighty works in Nazareth: "And Jesus could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And Jesus was amazed at their unbelief." The climate, the atmosphere, the chemistry was wrong!

And sadly this is also true for far too many churches today. The full effect of Jesus' power is greatly diminished when unbelief, disobedience, distrust, conflict has a dominant presence within a community of faith. If people come together, such as for worship, with narrow viewpoints, prejudice hearts, stubborn ignorance, hate, or even a refusal to understand ... they will misunderstand, as well as see no other viewpoint but their own. But if people come together, loving Christ and seeking to love each other, then even those who are widely separated in their beliefs can come together ... can be united in Christ.

Within this church, as in every church, there is laid on us the tremendous responsibility that we can either help or hinder the work of Jesus Christ. A church can be its own worse enemy ... or its best friend. All churches are gifted through Jesus Christ and have the tools and the power to move mountains ... to move the world. The old Greek Archimedes once said that if he were given three things, he could physically and scientifically move the earth off its axis: *Give me a standing place out yonder in space, a fulcrum, and a lever long and strong enough, and I will move the world.*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have our standing place, the Rock of ages, the sovereignty of God. We have our fulcrum, the friendship and the fellowship of Christ's church. We have our lever, the power manifested by the Holy Spirit. These are our credentials ... our credence to move the world ... to usher in the Kingdom of God.

The point is not that Jesus is helpless without our faith ... for he did sometimes work miracles without reference to faith. On the other hand, however, the point is that the unbelief of Jesus' own people had a restrictive effect on his work in their midst. And rather than stay to argue with them trying to convince them with a multitude of mighty works ... Jesus moved on. The truth is no church ... this one or any other ... can afford for Jesus to move on. The spiritual climate of a congregation, its sense of expectancy, its openness to the power of God at work through Jesus Christ, will in fact have a great deal to do with how much God's power can accomplish in that particular faith community.

Our unbelief does not render God powerless! However, when unbelief is dominant in a congregation, its restrictive effect on the mighty acts of God in that time and place is self-evident and sad. For the town's people of Nazareth, it was inconceivable that God could be at work in a common person, and yet it is true. In the common disciplines of the Christian life, and in the lives of ordinary people around us, we meet the One who we read about in Bible stories ... we come to know the common carpenter, who is the Holy One in whom the Kingdom of God draws near: Jesus of Nazareth, the Resurrected Christ.

The demonstration of this truth appears in the second half of our Gospel lesson. After Jesus left Nazareth, he went to other villages, while at the same time, he sent out the twelve disciples in pairs. Here the emphasis is on the direct authorization and empowerment of the messengers by Jesus. He "gave them authority" to announce the Good News by preaching, teaching, and healing in his name. What significance, if any, does this part of the text have for us? For one thing, the charge to travel light and to accept whatever accommodations are offered is an abiding call to Christians to simplify their lives and to trust God completely. I believe that what encumbers the effectiveness of the mission and ministry of today's Church is the enormous amount of baggage it carries. One such bag is its propensity to employ every gimmick and fad that comes on the market.

As one author writes, "When were Steven Covey and Tom Peters elected the 13th and 14th apostles?" The body of Christ is suffocating under the weight of faddish programs primarily developed from the influence of the American lifestyle, when in fact the marks of a Christian disciple, as well as the lifestyle of a Christian Church ... as Jesus lays it out in this passage ... is utter ... simplicity ... complete trust ... abounding generosity. The effectiveness of churches today lies in their willingness to simplify their efforts at ministry ... to trust more in its being God's church and not "their church," and to generously invest itself in people rather than things.

We rob ourselves of the authority of Christ when we clutter our lives with things, rather than strip ourselves of non-essentials. We are charged to travel light and we are called to follow the One who for our sakes became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich. Never forget that Jesus was rejected by his own people because he was of common stock. We are called to minister in ordinary ways, as he did, because "what matters is not to do remarkable things but to do ordinary things with the conviction that their value is enormous."

Let us not forget that what matters most is the power of God conferred on us by Jesus Christ. Into our individual lives and into the life and history of this church, God has poured an enormous treasure of blessings so that we may continue to do the Lord's work. That is why God graciously sends us and why we humbly go, and why remarkable good still comes through the obedience of inadequate messengers, such as ourselves. There is no doubt in my mind that Boyds Presbyterian Church is rich in history, however, we can not afford or must we become slaves to or lost in our past. God has done great works here, and God will continue to do great works through us ... if we let God work. As one author has written:

*You are as young as your faith, as old as your doubts;
As young as your self-confidence, as old as your fears;
As young as your hope, as old as your despair.*

Our future ministry simply lies, and I emphasize *simply*, lies in being the church ... just be the Church ... just be the faithful Body of Christ ... and let God be God!

Let us pray: Lord God, teach us the grace to look less at ourselves and more at You. Give us the ability to feel less of our own aches and pains, and more of the suffering of others. Teach us to take ourselves less seriously, and You and Your will for us more seriously. Amen.