

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller
The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
5 July 2015

Scripture readings:

2nd Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

Psalms 48

2nd Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

I have a confession to make. It's related to the Gospel for today. In my last parish where I served only four and a half years and where I can tell you I was not very happy and I suppose they weren't either *[laughter]* . . . Just between you and me we answered a million dollar debt that was left behind by the Grace of God with a three million dollar answer. But it had to do with adjusting attitudes, programs, and all the rest of it. People don't like progress sometimes, but in any case the point of this story is when I wrote my retirement liturgy when I left there the last thing in the liturgy, believe it or not, was "*the pastor goes to the sidewalk in front of the church and stamps his feet.*" *[laughter]* Can you believe it? Well, it was biblical *[laughter]* and if it wasn't reflective of it, the reality was reflective of what I was feeling at the time.

I suppose that's what Jesus is trying to tell us in the Gospel today. First of all, this Gospel is helpful for those who think about the virginity and the "ever virginity" of Mary. You get an awful lot of family members mentioned here. I know the contortions that we go through - well, we're all brothers and sisters. But this pretty much suggests that there were other family members. Is that going to matter to your faith? I hope not because I hope you are able to see that all of us who got here by virtue of the scientific reality of copulation, gestation and birth-giving are also used by God the way Jesus was.

He sent the twelve out. He told them what to do and how to behave, that we are somehow, because we are absolutely human, excused from the business of participating in the Body of Christ which we confess we become members of by virtue of baptism, by God's activity, not our own. In any case Jesus sort of expresses a frustration today. Then Jesus said to them - poor Jesus, it's never easy for him, is it - "*Prophets ... (I assume he's talking about himself) Prophets are not without honor ... (and I think the construction here is pretty ironic) ... They're not without honor except in their own hometown and among their own people and in their own house.*" It's hard to be taken seriously by people to whom you're related and with whom you live all the time.

I remember at the time of my mother's death Aunt Gertrude, who will be a hundred on the 17th by the way, Aunt Gertrude said to me, "*Well, you're going to do the service, aren't you?*" And I said, "*No, I'm not. I'm going to be a mourner.*" I sat with my family because, believe me friends, you cannot be an effective pastor to your own family. You know physicians can't do surgery on their own children, at least I hope not. We understand this frustration of Jesus.

But I think there's a suggestion here for us to take seriously, especially for us who take our personal relationship with Jesus seriously, to remember that we in fact are often and often see ourselves as Jesus' family, that we are and constitute the hometown, that we are and constitute the kin of Jesus, that we are and constitute the household of the Lord. And this poignant message that Jesus delivers, this frustration that he is expressing is being expressed to us who are in the household of faith, we who claim membership in the Church, membership in the Body of Christ by virtue of our baptism. It is *we* to whom he is speaking, and they are not particularly comfortable words. He's frustrated. "*Prophets are not without honor except at home, except where they're really well-known, except with their own families.*" I think he's saying essentially, "*You're not hearing me. You're not getting the point.*"

And I think, if you'll forgive me, that some of the frustration that is being expressed about our current pope is from his household, his family, his hometown, his own organization. Because the rest of

the world, friends, you and I are able to hear and receive his relatively radical messages with joy and appreciation and thanksgiving because he is telling a story not only to his own household but to us of God's love for all people and God's particular concern for the poor, the downtrodden, the disenfranchised.

Jesus is expressing a frustration not with those who don't know him but with those who do. That by virtue of our comfortable relationship with Jesus ... "*And he walks with me and he talks with me ...*" which leads to the kind of theology which concludes with "*It's just you and me, Jesus, against the rest of the god-damned world.*" And that's not the message! The message is the entire world is God beloved. And yes, Jesus does walk and talk with me, but Jesus also desires to walk and talk and to love and have a personal relationship with every last louse I cannot stand. My enemy is loved by God, and that makes me want to put my fingers in my ears. To this day I am in conversation with my dead mother because I cannot believe that she could have loved my brothers and sister as much as she loved me. [laughter] It cannot be, but I could never back her into the corner to admit it. And you know what? I could trust and believe my mother. She loved them as much as she loved me - and perhaps still does - no matter what I think about their deserts, and the older I get the more willing I am to believe that they deserved more than I thought they did - and I perhaps less.

So here is Jesus speaking to those of us who love him most, who have the best and most personal relationship, who call ourselves his family, his Body - and he's saying, "*I have trouble being heard by you. I have trouble being believed by you. I have trouble being accepted here.*" And that is my frustration because we and they take offense at him. We find often the real Gospel offensive because it challenges our prejudices. It invites us not to be afraid. It asks us to believe that God is in fact God and we in fact are not.

The contortions in the second lesson that St. Paul is going through are a real psychologist's picnic, aren't they? Here's St. Paul who really probably does think a whole lot of himself. But somebody else got a chance to go to heaven and he didn't. And somebody else got closer to God than he did, and he likes to boast about his closeness to God. But this is somebody who, for God's sake, went to heaven and came back . . . "*whether in the body or out of the body I don't know, but he had an experience I didn't have.*" And Paul confesses that he's got this struggle inside of himself with the justified part that he's delighted in and his desire to justify himself and be better than thou by virtue of his own work rather than being bettered by God's work which makes him equal to all the rest.

I read in a book just last evening which was given to me - it's a laundry list of truths of the world and one of them was, "*If you have a hero you have diminished yourself*" which is a suggestion that if you can't understand yourselves in an equal relationship and as equal to everyone else in the world, you are participating in a structure which puts some people down and other people up. No matter how wonderful that other person may be, you are saying it is O.K. to say some are better even if you're saying "*I am worse.*" And it drove Paul mad virtually so he gets to the point of saying, "*This is in me and I can't get rid of it.*" And he attributes that tension of wanting to justify himself and believing that God justifies himself as a gift of Satan. At least three times he asks God to fix that. Well, wasn't that wonderful. One, two, three - done. Not very persistent, is it?

So my question for us today is: Are we willing and able to take Jesus' words at face value and to acknowledge that perhaps we who are closest to Jesus sometimes get in the way of the Gospel, that we who have this wonderful personal relationship with Jesus, who constitute his hometown, his kin, his own house, his family are sometimes less receptive to the Gospel, the Good News of God's love for all people that he brings than others in the world. And that when we remind ourselves of this we aren't particularly quick to respond.

You know one of my pet issues at the moment is what our Diocese looks like when it gathers in convention. Last year the only people of color who represented the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Bethlehem in which are the urban centers of Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton, Hazleton, Wilkes-Barre and Scranton - the only two people of color to represent the work and participate effectively in the work and decisions of this Diocese came from this little congregation in the Poconos. The Body of Christ never was white. We need to take these admonitions seriously as we look at what happened in South Carolina and do not let ourselves forget that - that we live in a country and a society where hatred on the basis of idiotic, stupid things allows us to believe that we can kill each other, and sometimes we don't get that even though Jesus is our closest friend. And the message is from God, "*I love everyone as much as I love you.*" Well, it's easy for us to sit around and say, "*Gee whiz, I believe that. Yeah, that's good.*" And then to cover our tracks by saying, "*But they don't come here.*" Why might they come and why might they not come?

I've told you this story before, but I think it bears repeating, of my congregation in Allentown in a city which is nearing fifty percent Hispanic, large congregation, huge facility, money in the bank, building in excellent repair, in the middle of rows and rows and rows of houses which contain way more people than when I grew up as a kid - multiple family dwellings now. A Puerto Rican pastor who never once offered a Mass in Spanish - closed the church. Her sexton, a Pentecostal Spanish man, has gathered in that beautiful building a congregation. She moved three blocks away to a Lutheran Church on Main Street where there *is* no neighborhood. And the Church acts as if that is appropriate ministry. Friends, I can't agree less!

We live in neighborhood and community which is broader than this, and Jesus is saying today or we are hearing from scripture that those who sometimes get it least and least effectively and least seriously, are those who appear to be, want to be, and profess to be closest to Jesus. And we allow our *de facto* racist organizations to exist without saying a word about it, without *doing* anything about it, and by participating in that happily and without concern.

A prophet is not heard in her own hometown or her own home or her own village or among her own people as well as that prophet may be heard by others. And believe you me, friends, the world looks to the Church - and should - for an example.

We had the conversation just before church, Benny and I, about the decisions of the Supreme Court and its ruling on same gender marriage and all the rest of it. I visited the lawyer this week. James and I have known each other for forty-three years. I will pay tax on the half of the house that is understood to be his. That will not come to me. So the issue that everybody is getting bent out of shape about in terms of same gender marriage in the Episcopal Church. Chalk one up for them. That's what I said to Ben. Why is it the Church has to make these decisions after the government rather than be the leader before the government and bear the flag? That was where we were going with that.

The point is this: there are those in our fellowship - and we must hear them and we must speak with them - who will say, "*Well now, wait a minute. That's not what marriage is in the Bible.*" Well, let's take a good look at that - what marriage was. Since the Ten Commandments it was a property agreement. Women were belongings and to mess with somebody else's woman was to steal his property. Marriage has been to keep wealth and property together and in the family. But in scripture we have concubinary, polygamy... Is there much polyandry? Look it up. There are all different kinds of understandings about human relationships and morality that are very different from ones we have inherited in the 21st century -

very different! And to say that one is right or one is wrong at any given point and to ignore the rest of the history is not to do ourselves a service, but to look at what it is we are talking about in terms of human relationship. And I think the place is not to start where we can't go anywhere but always to start where we start with every issue that faces us as the Church - Where is the love of God in this? Where is the love of God in this for us? And where will the love of God sustain us even when we disagree, even when we don't understand, even when we are offended and when we have understandings - and everybody's entitled to his and her own understanding - even when our ecclesiastical understandings differ from our national understandings.

Well, Jesus says, *"Prophets are hard to hear when you're very close to them."* But it is a fair question today to say, *"How would Jesus respond to this situation in our land at this time?"* Well, look at Jesus' life. Jesus lost his life because he talked to women as equals and that was bad. It was wrong. Jesus lost his life because he treated prostitutes as human beings with integrity and as objects of God's love, not as objectified lovers. He sat down with cheats and thieves, bandits. He visited the tax collector who was jimmying everybody. He visited and ate with those whose food was not clean. He did things like pick corn on the Sabbath which was work. It broke the Law. And in every one of these instances he asked the question, *"What would God in God's love do in this situation?"* And can we as believers, as friends of Jesus, as those who are close to Jesus, believe that Jesus loves those law-breakers, those whores, harlots, sluts, those thieves, those prisoners? Can Jesus love them as much as Jesus loves me? Can God love all sinners as we believe God loves us? And if your answer is not "yes" then I think you need to ask what the word "Christian" means because we start by saying, *"We don't deserve 'jack' and we are given everything."* And so we need to practice understanding that there are others in life and in this world whom we understand as not deserving 'jack' but who are as much a primary object of divine love as any one of us. And then we need to say, *"How will that make a difference in how we live out our life together when we go out of these doors and say we are members of the Body of Christ. This is what Jesus looks like to us."*

And so it is - and we laugh and joke about it all the time and it is a part of the real joy in this place, friends, that our belief is that if you walk into the door of this little building built in 1847 you are perceived by us as a member of the Body of Christ because we believe Christ has perceived us in that way. And there is nothing that bars anyone from coming in that door who wants to. And you know how dangerous unlocked church doors have become, don't you? How dangerous a Bible study can be? This Gospel is dangerous because it is sometimes misinterpreted, sometimes not heard, often accepted and refused, and always challenging. This is not a Gospel with which we can curl up and sleep until our work is done. But this is a Gospel which says, *"They're not listening to me. You go do the work. Don't go alone. Go two by two. Heal people."* Jesus was severely restricted in his ability to cure people in the Gospel today. Did you hear that? He could only cure a few so he equipped everybody else to do it. *"Just because they can't hear me doesn't mean what I have to say shouldn't be heard."*

And so even though you may feel that you're only one or two, the message is yours to carry and it's a simple one - a simple one - but it means - and it really means - that you understand that God loves you and everyone else. Period. That's the Gospel. Does it get any easier? Does it get any harder? Is there comfort in that? How close to Jesus are you?

Amen.