

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

When Persecution Hits Close to Home

Mark 6:1-6

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. ²When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles!" ³Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. ⁴Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor." ⁵He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. ⁶And he was amazed at their lack of faith. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.

"Et tu, Brute?" Shakespeare immortalized these words as the dying words of Julius Caesar. The story goes that Caesar uttered these words after he saw his close friend, Brutus, among those who had conspire to assassinate him. The words mean, "Even you, Brutus?" Caesar knew he had many enemies in Rome and was probably not surprised that a group would gather to get rid of him. But it shocked him to be betrayed by his old friend, Brutus. Betrayal is one of the worst things a human being can experience. When someone whom you love unexpectedly hurts you, it can leave you in a state of shock. This morning, we look at this kind of betrayal in a spiritual sense. We see Jesus loved ones and closest associates turn on him and reject his message. As we look at Jesus' visit to Nazareth we think of how difficult it can be, at times, to walk in Jesus' footsteps and face rejection from those who are near and dear to us. We also receive encouragement from our Savior to persevere through these difficult times.

At the beginning of our reading we see Jesus leaving the house of a synagogue ruler named Jairus and heading to his hometown of Nazareth. You know what happened in that house. Jesus came to the bedside of a twelve year old girl who had just died and told her to get up. The girl listened. She was restored to life. It was Jesus' most amazing miracle to date. This wasn't his only miracle that he had performed while preaching and teaching in and around the cities of Galilee. By now, his fame as a miracle worker and authoritative preacher had spread throughout the region. And so, when he now arrived at this hometown, what do you expect to happen? You would think they would give him the hero's welcome. You would think they would roll out the red carpet, strike up the band, and honor Jesus with a parade down Main Street. As we look at the Gospel reading, however, we see that this is not the kind of reception that Jesus received at all.

When the Sabbath came, Jesus did what was natural. He went to the synagogue and began to preach and teach from the Scriptures. It was the custom at the synagogue to have visiting teachers stand up and address those who were gathered there. And so it is not surprising to find Jesus addressing this group and speaking God's Word to them. What is surprising is the way the group receives his Word. Instead of appreciating the privilege of hearing the Word of God from

the Son of God himself, they think it is a scandal. Mark records that they were offended by him. What did they find so offensive? They claimed that it wasn't the message that they found offensive. They were offended by the one speaking the message. They knew Jesus as the son of Mary and Joseph. They knew Jesus brothers and sisters. They knew Jesus as the local carpenter. They had visited his shop and talked with him on more than one occasion. They couldn't comprehend that the hands which they knew as the hands of a carpenter could also be used to heal the sick and raise the dead. Because they had such a problem hearing this message from Jesus, they ended up turning against him completely. How could they do this?

We are not the only ones who are outraged by their behavior. Jesus was outraged as well. He said to the people, "*Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.*" With each word of the hurt and outrage Jesus must have felt grows deeper. It's bad to be dishonored by one's hometown. It's even worse to be dishonored by one's own relatives. Worst of all is being dishonored by your own house—your own immediate family. Jesus spoke these words about his own experience. His hometown of Nazareth would not receive him. His own family members turned away from his teaching and rejected the Word of God. And what was the result? Jesus could not do any miracles there in Nazareth. This was not because Jesus lacked the power to do those miracles. It was because he was not asked. It was because of the lack of faith that he found in his hometown. Only a few came to him for healing and they were cured. But, on the whole, the people of Nazareth wanted nothing to do with Jesus and the message that he proclaimed. Mark sums up Jesus' feelings on the matter with the short sentence: "*He was amazed at their lack of faith.*" Jesus was shocked. He was stunned by the spiritual betrayal of those he knew and loved dearly.

As followers of Jesus, we are not immune to a similar experience. Jesus told us that we would be persecuted and rejected as we speak his Word to others. The hardest thing about this truth is the fact that this persecution can actually come from our own family members and closest friends. We are not shocked when the sinful, unbelieving world scorns us and laughs at us. But it is astonishing and hurtful when the one who rejects the Word of God from us is someone we know and love. Christians have had to face this kind of scorn from their own family members again and again since Jesus was first rejected in Nazareth. Maybe you know exactly what this is like. Maybe you have experienced the hurt of someone close to you either rejecting the Word of God from you or receiving the Word of God at first only to abandon it later on. It can leave you feeling astonished like Jesus did in Nazareth.

Where do you go from there? What do you do when you try and try to speak the Word and your efforts are constantly rejected? What did Jesus do in our gospel reading? In the final verse of our reading, we read that Jesus went around teaching from village to village. He did not give up. He realized that his mission went beyond his neighbors and relatives in Nazareth. He carried his Word to the next village and then the next... And what happened in those villages? At times, he was rejected. At times, the Word was received with joy. Either way, Jesus did not stop preaching and teaching to all those he met wherever his ministry took him.

We knew that Jesus also did something even greater than simply speaking God's Word to these people. He lived as a fulfillment of that very Word. He spoke about the kingdom of God, but then he established that kingdom of grace through his suffering and death on the cross. It is amazing to know that Jesus went through with his mission when the very people he suffered and

died for were the ones who had rejected him along the way. That is amazing and selfless love. That is the kind of Savior we have.

When we are tempted to give up and think that reaching out with Word is pointless because it isn't giving us the results we want, we need to remember first of all how wonderful it is that God never gave up on us. We need to go back into the Word of God for the strengthening of our own faith and the comfort and assurance that God gives us in his gospel message. Only after our own spirit is refreshed with the Word can we find the desire and the patience we need to keep reaching out to others even in the face of rejection and persecution. At times, it might mean going to the next village as Jesus did. It might mean seeking out new ministry opportunities and taking the message to someone we don't know as well, but who might receive it from us with joy. We never know the ways in which God might use us as a tool to accomplish his mission of changing hearts and lives with his Word.

Just because there may be other opportunities out there, however, does not mean we should give up trying to reach those who are closest to us as well. There is a bit of a "rest of the story" to this Gospel account. In our reading, we see a mention of Jesus' brothers, James and Judas. From other accounts, we know that these brothers of Jesus were among those who scorned and rejected Jesus' message while he ministered on this earth. But this is not the last we will hear of these men. We are actually very familiar with their names. We see them when we look at a list of the books of the Bible—James and Jude. These men who at one time rejected Jesus and his Word went on to become pillars of faith in the early Christian church. In fact, we read in 1 Corinthians of how Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection from the dead. This brother who had, at one time, rejected him was now his spiritual brother as well. What joy that must have brought to Jesus!

We can take heart knowing that the Lord can work such a change of heart in our loved ones as well. We keep speaking his Word, reaching out in love, and he can work miracles. And so we labor on. We know that the life of a Christian can be difficult. We know that it can bring us pain when we feel betrayed by those who are close to us. But we also know that our God is a good and gracious God. He will bless us work as we faithfully carry his message to those near and far. God give us the strength to follow in the footsteps of our Savior and proclaim his gospel message to souls who need to hear it. **Amen.**

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