

July 5, 2009/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

## **Jesus Was Amazed at Their Unbelief**

Mark 6:1-6 *And he could do not deed of power there...he was amazed at their unbelief.*

Jesus is coming home! Won't his family and friends, and the whole town, be proud! He's beginning to make a name for himself. He has calmed stormy seas, healed some people, and freed others from the demons that possess them. He has a group of disciples following him around. And he has been teaching some pretty good stuff, like the kingdom of God growing from small things to big things.

So Jesus comes to worship at his hometown synagogue. He does some teaching, and the people are impressed. Where did he get these teachings, this wisdom? How can he do such wonderful things? Their amazement starts to turn into something else. Wait a minute! Isn't this Mary's boy? The carpenter, a worker like us? We knew him when he was just a kid! His family is part of the neighborhood. Why, he's just like us, nothing special. All of a sudden people are no longer impressed, but suspicious and growing hostile. Jesus is too familiar. He's just one of them. Who does he think he is? Now they "take offense" at him. Literally this means they "stumble" over him.

Jesus must have been shaking his head by now. He remembers an old saying, and shares it--"A prophet of God is welcome everywhere but in his own country, his own family." So, Jesus is not able to do much in his own town. He heals a few people, but he leaves with a heavy heart and a troubled mind. He cannot really do anything if people don't have faith, if they don't believe God can do things right where they live, right in their own lives.

So often we look for God in the wrong places. We think a real spiritual leader has to be something flashy, some big shot charismatic type. We think we need to bring in a spiritual expert to fire us up. It can't be someone we know, someone right next to us. Too bad. Jesus must have grown up worshipping at this synagogue with these people. That's where he heard the stories of God. That's where he got his spiritual nurturing. Now look what he has become! He took it all seriously, took it to heart. Now God is doing something special with his life, and the very folks who were part of his upbringing can't see it, or accept it. They even feel threatened by it. Maybe he expects them to take it seriously, too!

That may be it. Jesus took it to heart, everything he learned and heard in the synagogue growing up. His life became more and more open to God. His relationship with God became clearer and deeper. That can be a threat, you know, especially when you want religion to remain something nice and safe, a pleasant activity in your life alongside all the other things. Kaye told me of two middle class congregations that had implemented the Children Worship & Wonder program. So here were their children, quietly listening to the stories of God, the stories of faith, responding in their own way, deepening their awareness of and relationship with God. You know what? The parents were not comfortable with that. In fact, they brought an end to the program. Why? Their children were taking it too seriously. Faith was no longer a safe religious activity, but was a real and vital part of their children's lives. I think that may be what was going on that day in the Nazareth synagogue. Jesus was taking it too seriously, and that meant upsetting the easy, normal, habitual religious patterns.

God's presence and activity isn't something special, apart from where we are and who is with us. God's healing, liberating, creating power is everywhere, in each of us. Isn't that what Jesus taught? You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. His specialness was not so that we would feel separate from him, different from him. It was so that we could become like him, a child of God, doing the things God gives us to do for the world. Right after this story, Jesus decides to send his disciples out to teach about the kingdom of God, and to heal people and liberate them from the demons that had hold on them. He can't do it all himself!

Maybe Jesus was just too close. If you don't keep the sacred as something special and apart, then you start discovering the sacred in yourself. You start waking up to the life God made you to live. You start listening in your own life for what you think God may be calling you to do. You begin to discover and use the gifts God has given you to contribute to the healing and liberating of life around you. You start, as Jesus said, to seek first the kingdom of God and God's way of life. That becomes the most important thing, and all the rest of the stuff is seen for what it is--illusions, distractions. It's much easier to slide along with the comfortable, the familiar, the hum-drum, and once in a while get a spiritual lift from a visiting expert, a spiritual hero, you might say.

The story of Jesus in his hometown synagogue is not a happy story, but it can lead us to insight. Jesus was amazed that people didn't believe. They weren't open to what God could do right there in Nazareth, in their own neighborhood and their own lives. They were satisfied with safe and comfortable religious activities, but afraid of or resistant to the actual life of faith.

In order for good things to happen, things that God wants to do, we need to work with Jesus. We need to cultivate and nurture belief, faith. And what is that but becoming more and more open and willing to see and be part of the reality of God's presence and activity in the world, in other people, and in ourselves? That, to me, is the transition from religion and religious activity to the living of our lives as a journey of faith, trustful openness to God as we follow the living Christ. And that is why we speak here about a journey inward and journey outward. Journeying inward, we touch our own relationship with the living God and awaken more and more to the sacred dimension of life. Journeying outward, we respond to what we feel Jesus is calling us to do, deeds of power, of God's healing and liberating love.