

In Our Own House

by

The Reverend Brian K. Ballard
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Mark 6:1-13

Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ² On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. ⁴ Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” ⁵ And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶ And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷ He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹ but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰ He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹ If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³ They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

In Zora Neale Hurston's seminal work *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the main character recounts her journey since leaving home. The book opens with Janie returning to her hometown after being gone for many years. During her time away she was married three times, and is now widowed again; she survived abuse, both from men and from nature; she became a businesswoman and a good cook. Now she is walking down the familiar streets of her hometown, while being followed by the watchful eyes of her former neighbors. "Seeing the woman as she was," Hurston writes, "made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song."¹

Janie is undisturbed by their stares. She proceeds home to sit on her porch where she is soon joined by her friend, Phoebe, one of the other women of the town. Janie says to Phoebe, "You know if you pass some people and don't speak to suit them, they got to go way back in your life and see what you ever done. They know more 'bout you than you do you self. An envious heart makes a treacherous ear. They done 'heard' about you just what they hope done happened."²

What is it about familiarity that breeds contempt? Janie has returned home changed, but her old neighbors can only see her as she was way back when. They cannot comprehend her change, cannot hear or accept her new story. They will only receive what they hope had happened, will only receive the person they once knew. A changed Janie is an affront to them, so they must construct her story based on their own beliefs and prejudices.

¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Amistad: New York, 2013), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

If you've read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* then you know that Janie's story is difficult. The change she undergoes is significant. But even if you haven't read it, I suspect you can relate: changing ourselves is challenging, often involving major events, new experiences, and time. But, to accept that someone else has changed: well that can be almost impossible. It requires the reworking of belief, the realignment of presuppositions, the choice to comprehend one's circumstances, and prejudices anew. Change can be costly, demanding a different disposition towards an idea, a person, or even ourselves. The scary part of change is that in letting go of what we currently believe, we make ourselves vulnerable to new, unfamiliar beliefs. We replace a grudge with curiosity; addiction with choice; resignation with possibility.

Change is at the core of the call to follow Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, "the call to discipleship is the call to change." And so it is, for you and for me. Do you want to know what God's will is for your life? Here it is. God doesn't care as much as we do about whether we become doctors or lawyers or teachers. God cares an awful lot about what kind of doctor, lawyer, or teacher you are. God cares about what you are doing and where you are right now in living your life for Christ. Are you following God faithfully today, or are your preconceptions and biases holding you back? This call is just as true for us today, as it was for Jesus and those in his day.

Like us, Jesus was human. Each day he made specific choices that categorized him in a certain way. He woke up in the morning, sometimes after not getting enough sleep. He ate breakfast and probably walked to work, waving awkwardly at passersby he saw each morning but never actually knew their name. He made friends, learned a trade, built furniture or houses, and was known to his neighborhood. He was Jesus, the carpenter, the son of Mary, brother to biological brothers and sisters.

If any of this sounds strange to you, if it is difficult to imagine Jesus offering a half-awake awkward smile at a neighbor, well I would

venture you are in good company. As Christians we assert that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. 100% of both. He is as much God as he is human, and he is just as human as us. If you've ever wanted to hear more about this human-side of Jesus, then I invite you to consider today's scripture passage.

It begins, "he left that place and came to his hometown." At this point, Jesus has been away from home for a while. When he last departed town, probably around age 30, he went off to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. From there he was tempted in the wilderness before beginning his ministry in Galilee. Much has changed in the few months or perhaps one year since Jesus last walked the familiar streets of his hometown. He left as Jesus, son of Mary. He returned as Jesus, rabbi, speaker of wisdom, and doer of deeds of power.

At first his former neighbors are captivated, "Where did this man get all this?" they ask. "What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!" But then like now, their understanding of who he was clouds their ability to see who he has become. Jesus' former neighbors ponder aloud, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" We're told, "...they took offense at him." One commentator notes, "the townspeople of Nazareth expect to see the Jesus they have always known, the one who seems no different from them. When Jesus preaches with wisdom and performs deeds of power, the people of Nazareth cannot see beyond their own limited view of him."³

In response to such a negative homecoming, Jesus offers the rebuttal, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." We're told he can do no deed of power there and was amazed at their unbelief. Jesus has returned

³ Beverly Zink-Sawyer, "Mark 6:1-13: Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2009), 215.

home and been forced back into the mold in which his neighbors used to know him. Their inability to truly see Jesus prohibits them from receiving what he has come to offer. Their biases block God's healing power.

This weekend, as we celebrate our country's 245th birthday, I wonder if we have fallen into a similar situation as those early neighbors of Jesus. How does our hometown of America impact the way we hear the words of Jesus? What do we miss or ignore because of our country's past with Jesus? Our nation's history shows that we have a tendency to see Jesus through the lens of our own choosing, of particular policies and parties. We've often used Jesus as a rubber-stamp endorsement instead of a light to shine across our land and lives.

In his second inaugural address, President Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of the civil war, spoke about the theological crisis between the north and the south. He said, "both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered--that of neither has been answered fully."⁴

What if Jesus is way beyond our limited American view of him? Both the north and the south believed God was on their side. They believed it was only a matter of time before God willed them to victory. When we believe God is on our side, we are vindicated in all our biases and prejudices. We are in the right, and have no call to change. As our hometown history reveals, such a posture is deadly and dangerous, not to mention unfaithful. To truly be like Jesus, to live out the plan God has for us, we must put aside our hometown mold of Jesus, the one who looks just like us. We must dare to see things differently and follow the God who is walking down the street right now.

⁴ Library of Congress; <https://www.loc.gov/item/mal4361300/>

When we do, though, we may cause a stir, our former neighbors and friends may not welcome us back. In the scene after Mark tells us about Jesus being rejected by his hometown, the disciples are sent out two-by-two to other towns, away from Nazareth. When they are not welcome somewhere they leave, shaking off the dust that is on their feet. Like Jesus, they too will be rejected. The second half of this scripture reading is included because Jesus wants to prepare the disciples, to prepare us, for the same rejection he has received.

Friends, following Jesus faithfully will change us. Like our savior, we may encounter friction with our hometown and those who know us best. But with each step we will be moving more and more towards the freedom and life that Christ has for us. We will witness deeds of power we previously missed because of our judgments about how and through whom God's work could be done. In short we will receive grace. As Bonhoeffer also said, "Such grace is costly because it call us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ."⁵

When you are tempted to retreat to the comfort of your familiar hometown beliefs, to the resignation that life will be what it will be, remember that change is the antidote to despair. Change brings hope by countering the belief that tomorrow will only bring more of today. The call to discipleship is the call to change, and it is there that we will encounter our living God who was rejected because he changed. As transformed disciples we will truly see Jesus. May you put aside your biases and comfortable preconceptions to risk encountering a Jesus that is bigger than us or our country. May you meet Jesus in unexpected people, and be witnesses to great deeds of power. May you go out and proclaim this good news with every step you take.
Amen.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (The Macmillan Company: New York, 1963), 47.

