

Mark 6: 1-13 Rejecting or Receiving

We are continuing in our gospel readings to follow the course of Jesus' ministry as reported by Mark. We have just finished considering two events where Jesus demonstrated amazing power: the calming of the wind and waters on the Sea of Galilee followed by two healings. Large crowds have gathered around Jesus and followed him around the countryside as he taught and healed those who were brought to him. It seems that he has made his home with Peter in Capernaum. It is there and the surrounding area that many of these deeds have happened. As we have been told of the things he has done, we have also been told that not everyone was happy about his actions. He has been criticized for allowing his disciples to pick and eat grain on the Sabbath, for healing on the Sabbath, for associating with the unclean, and accused of doing things through the power of Beelzebul. Today's passage has Jesus returning to the town of his boyhood—Nazareth. Jesus arrives in Nazareth with his disciples on a Sabbath and goes to the synagogue and to the astonishment of those present he begins to teach. Since his teaching had been received with astonishment before—because of the authority of his speaking this is not surprising. The disciples wondered in amazed fear at the power he demonstrated in calming the windstorm. We expect people to be amazed at the teaching they hear. Although we are not told in Mark the specifics of what Jesus taught, we can only think that they would have been consistent with what has been previously reported. In Capernaum he healed a paralytic by telling him to get up and walk because his sins have been forgiven. His concern seems always to reach out and to show compassion to those who were outside the parameters accepted by the cultural norms. He disregarded rules about "work" on the Sabbath when it meant either plucking grain to eat or healing the sick. Jesus' words and actions challenged the accepted, so much so that Mark reported his mother and brothers came where he was teaching and sought to restrain him. This was in chapter 3, verse 21 where the reason for their coming is given: "for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.'" The response to Jesus' teaching in Nazareth begins with astonishment—not an amazement of wonder but a different type of reaction. They seem to have quickly become enmeshed in their recollections of his past while living there as a boy. "They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of his power are being done by his hands!'" It seems that they cannot accept that "this man" is not defined by the way that they knew him. They remember him as the carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon. They know his sisters and since Mark doesn't mention a father, evidently the story of Mary's pregnancy while engaged may still be known in the village. Because of this collective memory we are told that they "take offense at him." They were offended by what his coming into their synagogue. It seems that the fame of this man has preceded him. They have heard of the things done by this man in nearby places. Yet his appearance in the village seems to have provoked anger and shock. If you think about it that is not an unusual reaction. When someone in a community especially if it is someone who doesn't exactly fit accepted norms becomes successful and/or famous there are usually two responses. There are those whose reaction is "Wow, look at that local person who made good!" Then there are those whose reaction is more like: "Well, look who has come back to

town and is too big for his britches to boot, but we remember where you come from and who you really are.” In Nazareth, Jesus got the second reaction. The interesting question is why. Perhaps it was just really hard for them to imagine that someone as ordinary who had lived among them as Jesus had could possibly make good. That is, they could not reconcile the ordinary with the extraordinary and felt shown up and threatened by the comparison. So they refuse to acknowledge him. In the social system of the day, your status at birth fixed and defined who you would be so they saw Jesus as a carpenter—a low-status manual laborer. Jesus wasn’t what they expected a prophet, let alone a Messiah to look like. To accept him as such was to call into question much of what they thought they knew about the world and about people and about themselves. In this case, it’s not that Jesus is different from them—after all he was one of them—but the problem is that he is different from what they think a prophet should be. And so rather than revise their expectations, they dismiss him. And aren’t we all rather like those residents of Nazareth? Isn’t that what is so difficult when we talk about those who are different from us? Whether the difference is in age or occupation or economic status or race or ethnicity, we tend to have a preconceived notion about how people should be and when we meet someone who differs from that we often find it threatening. All too often, we are tempted to do the same as those villagers—reducing someone who challenges us and our ideas to a single attribute about that person. Do we have our own way of dismissing someone as just a carpenter because in that way we won’t have to treat them as the total person God has created, redeemed and offered to us as a gift in our lives; perhaps to give us an example of grace and mercy; perhaps to teach us compassion. If we reject others out of fear we will never know what blessing they may have brought to us. For all of Mark’s brevity, there are many connections between the things he chooses to tell us. In fact, you might say that Mark’s approach to the story he has to tell is like the Reader’s Digest Condensed Version. It may be shorter but it has all the things we need to know. Our passage today contains not only the news of Jesus’ rejection in his boyhood home, but also his response to the rejection. We have his statement: “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own home.” This is a verse that is widely quoted in other places to explain rejections or disparagements when someone feels they are not getting the respect they deserve. What Jesus does here is self-identification with a long line of counter-cultural figures within Israel. Those who brought the Word of God to the people of Israel but were ignored and rejected because the message was contrary to the way those people wanted to live. But we should note that that is not Mark’s final word on the situation. In verse 5 we are told that Jesus could do no deed of power there. Many have read that literally and interpreted it as that Jesus’ abilities were hampered by the rejection and unbelief of the villagers. Yet the verse continues, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. Now it seems to me that Jesus was still able to heal. In other places healing was seen as deeds of power. In Nazareth, because of their unbelief, because they did not believe that he was capable of healing, any healing that he did was not attributed to him. It wasn’t that Jesus couldn’t do wondrous things; it was that they refused to see what occurred as being something he did. Mark has presented us with stories about outsiders who recognized Jesus’ identity and have faith. Mark then tells us of insiders who failed to discern Jesus’ identity and so rejected him. Before this we have the naming of the apostles and now after this rejection we have Jesus’ true response to Nazareth—he sends out the disciples empowering them to cast out demons and to heal others as they

proclaimed his message of repentance. Jesus expands the reach of his ministry. Jesus sends out his disciples telling them to take a staff and wear sandals but to take no money or provisions. He sends them out on a journey of some length, hence the staff and sandals, but sends them out dependent on the hospitality of those who will receive them. They were to continue to spread his message in households, not the synagogues. Synagogues with established religious traditions and authorities were not always susceptible to new ideas and activities that could represent a new move of God. But even there, Jesus prepared them for the fact that not all would receive them, just as not all welcomed him. Mark reports that the disciples' mission was successful. Rejecting or receiving. At the heart of Mark's gospel the question of Jesus' identity is foremost. And the question is always to each group—who do you say that Jesus is? Jesus is rejected by the traditional religious leaders and those who cannot accept his call for them to repent. Jesus is recognized correctly by those who are marginalized or who recognize their own neediness and see in him acceptance. We today have the same identity question. Who do we say Jesus is? Do we totally accept the message Jesus brought, not just about our salvation which is God's gift to us, but about the life we are called to live? Are we open to the possibilities which God places before us which challenge our way of thinking? Rejecting or receiving the message that we are to love God before everything else and to love others, friends and enemies, neighbor and stranger as we love ourselves is not just about our personal destination after this life. It is about how we are sent out on the journey to participate in bringing the kingdom of God to more places here and now. There are many demons of hate and prejudice around us to be cast out. There are many who are sick in spirit due to those demons of hate and prejudice. We are empowered with the message of Christ that God so loved the world—all of us—that Christ came and redeemed us. Let us truly receive this message and then take it with us as we go. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.