

“Making Space for Growth”

Mark 6:1-13

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From the Pulpit

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Let us pray: O Loving and Kind God, we thank You for gathering us around Your Word for us this day. Speak to us now and touch us with what it is that each one of us needs to receive this day. And, O dear God, may the words that I have to offer here, this morning, please You and honor You and glorify Your holy name. In Jesus’ sweet name, we pray, amen!

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The last time that I preached, a few weeks ago, I shared with all of you that Shane (my spouse) and I are beginner gardeners in this new season of our lives.

But, as I told you, we are certainly **not** rushing into this new interest and pastime of ours. Rather, we are moving at a very gradual and incremental pace. The spiritual director in me likes to say that we are being very *intentional* about this new practice and discipline of ours.

Now, it has been almost two months (it was on Mother’s Day) that Shane planted some cherry tomatoes in the garden box in our backyard. And, since then, we have been witnessing the *gradual* growth and the *ripening* and *flourishing* and even *plenitude* of our tomatoes. And, I must say, that they are VERY sweet and QUITE tasty, too!

Now, as I noted a few weeks ago, Jesus often used gardening parables and lessons – to teach his followers about the nature and the attributes of the KIN-dom of God.

And, of course, **that** is to be expected given the agricultural context of first century Palestine where the majority of the people were peasants and farmers.

Now, *this* Sunday, our Gospel reading offers us **another** lesson about planting seeds and nurturing growth, **but** it is a planting and a seeding and a farming and a harvesting, if you will, of another kind.

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Our reading from Mark, this morning, **is** a familiar story *but* it's also a **painful** and upsetting story, and it's one of those many **DIS**-comforting Gospel readings because it is the **first** story that we have in Mark of Jesus being rejected! And, of all places, this incident happened in his *hometown* – by his *own* people – there – in Nazareth!

On one hand, it's very hard to understand how this could have happened, there, in what Jesus likely considered to be a “safe and sacred space,” surrounded by his family, friends and neighbors – and right there – in the very synagogue where he had been nurtured in his faith as a child!

Now, at first, the hometown folks – who likely had played a role in his faith formation – appeared to be absolutely *captivated* by his teaching!

They exclaimed:

What is this wisdom that has been given to him?

What deeds of power are being done by his hands!

But it wasn't long before this sense of familiarity turned into contempt and the hometown folk then sneered and said:

“Is not this the son of the carpenter, and the son of Mary – and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?” And they mentioned his sisters, too.

What do YOU make of this highly charged moment? This unexpected turn of events? This poignant moment where **Jesus** was being rejected by those *who* we want to believe loved him the most – and *where* (that is, his hometown

synagogue) – we would assume would have been a welcoming and safe and accepting place where he could return.

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Well, our text this morning tells us that Jesus *did* respond to the harsh reaction of his hometown folk with some very pointed words of his own. He said:

*Prophets are not without honor,
except in their own hometown,
and among their kin,
and in their own house.*

Now, it is important to understand that this story from Mark is the *first instance* where Jesus is described as a **prophet**. And the word, prophet comes from the Biblical Greek root word *profetes* (pro -FEE- TEEs) which refers to someone who receives revelations from God for others.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, prophets are the ones who gave messages to the kings and to the nations. And these prophetic messages would either lead people to salvation ... or explain why God was about to punish them!

The words that Jesus spoke that day to **the** community that played a significant role in his faith formation were strong words and powerful words and words that were loaded with meaning about the *true identity* of this familiar one – this beloved one from their own community... **this one** who they had known and loved as Jesus!

In my recent reflections on this text, I admit and I confess that I can easily relate to the townspeople of Nazareth. Because there certainly have been moments – and times – in my life – when I wasn't able to recognize the presence of the Living Christ right there, in my midst.

- times when I have held onto grudges rather than letting them go;
- times when I have not taken responsibility for the ways that I have hurt others;
- times when I have dug in my heels rather than opening myself up to another way of thinking;
- and times when I have relied on my own understanding rather than seeking God's desire for my life.

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In a Biblical commentary that I recently read about our text from Mark today, written by the Rev. Dr. Beverly Zink-Sawyer, a professor of Preaching and Worship at Union Seminary in NYC, (one of our UCC seminaries, by the way), she wrote:

The people of Nazareth expect to see the Jesus who they have always known, the one who seems no different than them; and so, they aren't able to see beyond their own limited views of him;

Can YOU think of a time in YOUR life when it was difficult to recognize the presence of the Living Christ in your very midst?

- Maybe it was a time when you weren't able to recognize an open door when so many other doors had previously closed on you.
- Maybe it was a time when your worries about the future actually prevented you from moving forward;
- Maybe it was a time after you had been hurt by others that you then responded by closing yourself off to new relationships;
- Or maybe it was a time – like Jesus – when you were rejected by your community rather than being accepted for who you truly are.

In our text for today, Jesus certainly rattles the members of his hometown faith community for their inability to recognize Him for who he truly was ...

And so, I believe that the invitation for us this day -- as followers of Jesus -- is to create the intentional space in our lives -- where would seek and experience personal growth --and spiritual healing -- including the unconditional love of our Lord, Jesus the Christ.

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In times of uncertainty and change and anxiety, it can be so hard to recognize the Living Christ in our very midst.

And so, as we faithfully navigate the times of transition in our personal lives as well as in our life together as First Church, may we do in a spirit of openness and mutuality and humility and collaboration.

And may we always seek to recognize the active presence of the Living Christ in our lives.

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In recent days, as I was reflecting on the **closed-ness** of our Gospel scene from Mark for today -- and the **closed-ness** of those who had gathered, there, at the synagogue in Jesus' hometown who were unable to *really see* Jesus for who he truly was -- I was reminded and inspired by some prayerful words that were written by the late Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman (a mentor of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.):

“Lord, Lord, Open Unto Me”

Open unto me, light for my darkness;
Open unto me, courage for my fear;
Open unto me, hope for my despair;
Open unto me, peace for my turmoil;
Open unto me, joy for my sorrow;
Open unto me, strength for my weakness;
Open unto me, wisdom for my confusion;
Open unto me, forgiveness for my sins;
Open unto me, tenderness for my toughness;
Open unto me, love for my hates;
Open unto me, Thy Self for myself;
Lord, Lord, open unto me!

May we all be inspired to create the space for spiritual growth and healing in our lives and in our life together as First Church and in the world around us!

In Jesus' name, we pray, amen!