

By this time in Mark's Gospel,
Jesus has had a fairly successful start-up
as an itinerant preacher and miracle worker.

After getting baptized, warding off the tempter in the wilderness,
and calling disciples
(Mark takes about 10 verses to tell what it takes Matthew and Luke whole chapters)
Jesus teaches and heals the man with an unclean spirit in Capernaum.
He then heals Simon's mother in law,
a person with leprosy,
someone who is paralyzed
and a man with a withered hand.

Of course in the midst of all this healing,
he is also preaching and teaching,
dealing handily with opponents who question him,
and whom, to be honest, he sometimes seems to provoke deliberately.

In chapter 5, right before our passage for today,
Jesus is clearly at the height of his popularity and success.
Mark goes into significant detail with the stories
of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac,
as well as the healing of Jarius' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman.
In all of these stories, Jesus comes off as something of a hero,
doing what is miraculous and generous and beneficial for all who turn to him.

All of that changes in chapter 6 when Jesus comes home to Nazareth.

I don't know if the cell phone generation experiences the disconnect
of coming back home after a significant change in the same way anymore,
but I remember coming back to the farm the first few times
after being away at college.

We wrote letters, certainly,
and even called home once a month or so.
But I remember when those first few college breaks came around
and I headed back home home to Illinois.
It was a rather big deal:
What if I didn't fit anymore?
Would they notice how I'd changed, how grown up I was?

Would I revert to being the same kid they'd always known?
How would being home be after the excitement of college?
Would I be eager or reluctant to come back after the vacation?

For Jesus, all these questions are intensified.

Jesus hasn't been away at college;

he has in fact been of age for a long time.

But he has radically changed directions.

He had been, after all, an obedient son up until recently.

No doubt he continued his Torah studies

as he continued working in his trade,

the carpentry work that kept food on the family table

and had its own satisfactions,

the smell of new planed surfaces,

the satiny feel of cleanly finished surfaces.

But all that changes with his baptism in the wilderness by John.

At that point, Jesus' path takes a rather bizarre turn,
from his family's point of view.

Earlier, in chapter three,

we see evidences of this tension between Jesus and his family.

He was home briefly at that point as well.

Mark doesn't give us many details but in 3:20, just after Jesus has put together
his inner circle of twelve disciples,

and he's heading back to Nazareth,

such a large crowd follows him that he and his disciples
can't even function in a daily life kind of way.

They can't even eat, Mark says,

for the press of the crowd.

His family hears what is happening and they also hear an interpretation of what is happening.

Who they hear this from or how they hear, we don't know.

But what they hear is that Jesus is "beside himself,"
or "out of his head."

They try to intercept him and they are prepared to use force.

Mark says they try to seize him.

More than likely they are trying to protect him

and also themselves

and the reputation of their family—a jumble of emotions and motives,
like most family crises.

They even send for scholars from Jerusalem
who come and diagnose him as possessed by demons.

It is in that context that Jesus proclaims that his true family
are those who do the will of God.

Well intentioned his family may have been,
but they are thwarting his mission to be about his business.

Jesus, *and God*, have their way at that point and he goes on to teach in parables,
continue healing, exorcising demons and carrying out his ministry.

So here we are at our text for today.

He tells Jarius and his wife to find something for their little girl to eat,
and takes off for Nazareth with his disciples.

I suppose he hopes, being fully human and like us,
as well as divine

that this time things will go better with the home folks.

Perhaps this time they will understand.

Perhaps this time they will accept this wild and crazy mission
that he is somehow being compelled toward.

Perhaps this time they will begin to see how important this is to him.

Jesus enters Nazareth with some confidence.

He goes to the synagogue just like he has been doing in every other town.

He begins to teach just like he has been doing in every other town.

At first all does go well.

The people are impressed:

Where is he getting all this, they wonder.

Wow, he's really wise!

And he's been doing all these wonderful things—healing people,
exorcising demons, wow!

But something happens, and their wonderings take on a certain edge.

Hey, who does this guy think he is?

Isn't this the guy that grew up here?

We know Mary, that's his mother.

And you know his brothers—who are they again?

Oh, James, Joseph, Judah and...and Simon,

I think,

(guess they ran out of names

that start with J by the time they got to Simon!)

He's got a raft of sisters—they're around here somewhere.

The more they thought about the whole thing,
the more antsy and uncomfortable they got.

Nazareth wasn't Jerusalem, after all, or even Bethlehem.

They were simple folk—maybe it was all right for city folk
to put on airs and think they were somebody,
but not the boy next door in Nazareth.

The doubts, the uneasiness, the discomfort spread through the crowd
gathered in the synagogue at Nazareth that day.

The disapproval spread from face to face
and grew until it hung over the crowd
like a heavy cloud sucking the air out of the room.

Jesus didn't fight it, not this time at least.

He shrugged, so to speak.

“Well, a prophet has no honor in his own hometown,
as they say,” he told his disciples.

He really wasn't able to do much there.

There were a few really sick people and he couldn't help himself,
as his compassion welled up despite his disappointment
at the hostile welcome in the very place
where he had always felt he belonged.

He did heal those people.

But it's not really a happy story.

This experience at Nazareth evidently got Jesus to thinking
as he left and began circulating to other towns and villages in the vicinity.

I don't know what we would do in a similar circumstance.

What our political leaders and celebrities try to do
is figure out what went wrong
and try to fix it.

Maybe next time the poll numbers will go up.

What Jesus seems to have done, however, is come to terms with the reality
that people had to decide for themselves whether they were going to accept him or not.

In fact, just after that bad time in Nazareth,
he sat the disciples down and gave them instructions for going out
on their own missionary journeys.

But instead of telling them what to pack and how to plan in order to *succeed*,
he told them to go out with nothing, completely vulnerable, and trust they would be welcome.
This didn't make a whole lot of sense, especially after Nazareth,
but it wasn't the last time that Jesus would set normal expectation on its head.

Go, expecting that your needs will be met
and you will receive the hospitality you need.
Go in need, go vulnerable, go trusting.

You might not be welcomed, however.
If that happens, don't force it.
Shake the dust off your feet as you go
as a witness to the poor hospitality you have received
and go on to the next town.

Was this a hostile gesture?
No, but it was telling the truth.

The disciples were not to retaliate for poor hospitality,
but they could and should tell the truth about it.

The gospel is not coercive.
We cannot make anyone receive it.
Another place in Mark, Jesus tells a parable,
to the effect that we sow the seed,
but God and the fertile ground of the human heart make it grow,
—or not.
If the ground of the human heart is hard, not even God will violate that decision.
God could, of course, but God won't.
That's the nature of God.

At this point in the Gospel,
the disciples come through for Jesus.

They go out with no more preparation and no more protection
than Jesus himself, vulnerable, needy, humble.
They preach repentance, they cast out demons, they heal the sick.

Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Where do these stories about Jesus and his disciples resonate with our lives?
Do we think we have Jesus figured out about as well as the guy next door?
Or can he still surprise us and make us think about things in a new way?

Are we hindering Jesus from using his power or are we helping?

Are we taking or leaving the invitation of God
to soften our hearts and let the seed grow in us?

Are we ready to set out with the disciples and be a guest in the world?
Alan Kreider, a colleague of mine, talks about hospitality
as a three legged stool.

One leg is the hospitality we show each other and God
every Sunday morning when we show up in church.
A second leg is the hospitality we show visitors
when they arrive at our doorstep.
But the third leg is the hardest
and maybe the most important.
The third leg of the hospitality stool
is our willingness to go out and be a guest in the world.

It's what Jesus told the disciples to do.

Alan and Eleanor Kreider and I all live in the same neighborhood
in south central Elkhart.

It is a diverse, lower income neighborhood,
about 1/3 Hispanic; 1/3 African American and 1/3 Anglo.
And then there are few other people,
there's an Iraqi family a few blocks down the street
and a Vietnamese grocery store several block away.

It's an interesting place to live,

but for 15 years that's about all I did there.

Then about 5 or 6 years ago some things happened,
some not so good and some very good.

But I began to be invited into people's homes,
a birthday party here, an anniversary there,
Memorial Day cookouts and 4th of July BBQs.

And that was the crucial step.

So much changed and the neighborhood became my truest home.

I still don't fit.

One of the hardest things was trying to explain the notion of a sabbatical
to my friends.

Yes, I was going to be gone for a year.

Yes, I was going to come back.

When I come back I will live here again
and I will have the same job.

I didn't even tell them that I was going to get paid while I was gone.

That was just too hard to explain.

So I'll never quite fit,

but I am much loved and gently accepted.

And this is the place where my ordination a few years ago
has come to mean the most.

In this neighborhood where no one really goes to church much,

I am privileged beyond words to be a sort of informal pastor,
to do weddings and funerals and to be available to pray
when folks get sick or have to go away on a trip
or sometimes when things just get us down.

It all began, however, when I invited to be a guest,

(and said, yes. Sure.)

What is the invitation for Emmaus Road Mennonite Church in these stories of Jesus?

How do these accounts resonate with our lives today?

What is Jesus calling you to be and do this day?

“He called together the twelve,
and began to send them two by two.”

You, too, are being called together,
and also sent out—into the world around you,

The authority of Jesus: take it or leave it
Sermon on Mark 6:1-13
Emmaus Road Mennonite Church

Mary H. Schertz
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Berne, Indiana

the world that God loves
and that he sent his son to save.