

Knowing Jesus

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph,[a] Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor." He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.

Mark 6:1-6

Several years ago, I was invited to speak for homecoming services at my home church in Maurertown, Virginia. It was quite an honor, and it was great to see everyone again. It's a small, rural community, and I had known most of the people since childhood. When I got up to preach, I looked out over the congregation, and there on the front row right in front of me were all these people who were in youth group with me, and with whom I went to school; these were the people I had been with when I was a teenager, the people who were present when I had done most of the stupid things I had done as a teen, and who knew about every stupid decision I had made. I have preached before large crowds with people great and small; I have even preached to other preachers without being nervous. When I saw those people who knew me so well, all of a sudden I got a little nervous.

I suppose it's only natural. "Familiarity breeds contempt" is how the old saying goes. These people are astounded by what Jesus says and does, and yet because they believe they know him, they can't seem to believe he's for real. "Wait a minute," they say. "We know this guy. This is Joe and Mary's oldest, isn't it? Getting a little big for his britches, isn't he? Why, we knew him when he was knee high to a grasshopper, running around with all the other kids. Who does he think he is?"

Well, that's a question that comes up again and again in the gospel of Mark: who does Jesus think he is? Who do we think he is?

Sometimes, people are like a bucket of crawdads: if one crawdad starts to climb out of the bucket, the others will try to climb out over him, effectively pulling the errant one back into the bucket. It seems that people are often reluctant to let the people they know well out of the bucket we call familiarity. We are uncomfortable when our kin start taking on airs, or when they seem to be too big for their britches—and sometimes, we even feel a need to take them down a peg or two. I imagine that's what the problem is in this passage: the people in Nazareth just know Jesus a little too well to let him get away with being important.

It's ironic, in a way. If you've ever read through the gospel of Mark, you find that Jesus spends a lot of time trying to keep secret who he is. In story after story, he tells people not to tell. When he cast demons out of someone, he tells them not to tell; when he cures a very sick little girl, he tells them not to tell. When he is transfigured before the disciples, he tells them not to tell. Bible scholars call it the "messianic secret," and it's the idea that Jesus doesn't want to announce who he is before the time is right. What's ironic is that here in Nazareth, in his hometown, Jesus could jump up and down and scream that he is the messiah, and it wouldn't make any difference. Go figure.

It's interesting, too, that this story appears in the same gospel in which we find Mary and others of Jesus' family coming to take him home because people are saying he's crazy. Imagine what must have been going around town by this time: "that boy of Mary's sure has made a mess of his life. He's got all the Pharisees mad at him, and he goes around doing faith-healings, and preaching all these strange ideas about how people should treat each other. Poor Mary was so embarrassed that she had to drive through three counties to try to bring him home, but he wouldn't come with her. He must have just lost his mind.

Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, it looks to us like it's Jesus' neighbors in Nazareth who are crazy. We almost want to shout back through time at them: "Are you nuts? Don't you realize that this is the Son of God? Don't you realize what you're missing by not understanding who he is? You could have so much—he could do so much for you! You're missing it!"

Maybe knowing Jesus is more complicated than we thought. It's pretty clear from this text that knowing Jesus isn't the same thing as believing in Jesus. If we know Jesus the way his family and neighbors knew him, it could be a problem. I do wonder sometimes if that isn't a problem we in the church face more often than we realize.

We know what it means to know Jesus, don't we? We have accepted him as the Messiah. We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and we proclaim Him Lord and Savior of the World. We know Jesus. But isn't it true that sometimes we get too comfortable with the Jesus we know? Isn't it true that because we've heard the stories so many times, it's often hard for us to imagine anything surprising about Jesus?

We're not any different from the people who lived a couple thousand years ago, at least not in this respect. We like things to sail along smoothly; we have been around the church and the Christian community long enough to know what to expect, and to know who is capable of doing what. We know who the leaders are, we know who the followers are, and we even know who the troublemakers are. Sometimes routine can be a valuable thing, but it's like the routine motion of a river that travels the same course, over and over, passing through the same places, wearing its bed into a deep channel and wearing every rough rock in its path into a smooth stone. Routine will end up polishing us over, so that there aren't any vulnerable places for the water or the Spirit to catch anymore. We become complacent and somewhat inert: it's hard for us to be moved, hard for us to be touched, and hard for us to be changed. Sometimes we're like

those people down in Nazareth: we know Jesus. We know him so well that we can't hear anything new.

Have you ever been around someone who's new to the faith? There's a sense of wonder in that person, a sense of surprise and fascination that's very refreshing and very encouraging, especially to those of us who have been part of the church for a long time. It can be like a cold glass of water on a long, hot day; those of us who have been around for a while could really use that energy that seems to fill up every corner of the room when someone is discovering the joy of faith for the first time.

When I was a student in Seminary, my Preaching Professor taught me something new about reading the Bible. "You should always expect to be surprised," he would say. "The first thing you should do is make a list of everything you think you already know about the passage in question, and when you've done that, throw the list away. Whatever the Scripture tells you this time, it won't be on that list." I've found that to be valuable advice. I used to take notes in the margins of my Bible, but I stopped doing that because I found that I'd look at the note I'd written instead of looking for something new. I want to be surprised every time I read the Bible, every time I go out into the world to see what God is doing.

Sometimes what we already know about Jesus gets in the way of our listening to what Jesus is saying to us in the here and now. Sometimes what we already think we know has rubbed us so smooth that there's not even a nick in our surface into which a new thought could penetrate.

What can we do? We need to recognize that whatever we may think we know about Jesus, he is still full of surprises. We can assume, since we believe that Jesus is risen from the dead, that he is still trying to communicate with us, and still trying to teach us new things. Maybe we can find new ways to hear the Scriptures. Maybe we can find new ways to experience the love of Jesus. Maybe we can see God's grace being made

known in someone we've never thought about before. Maybe what we need to do is to meet Jesus again as though for the first time.