

Year B Proper 14 2024 Setting Limits on a Limitless God

“And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.”

Jesus has gone back to his hometown for the first time in Mark’s Gospel. It’s not the first time we’ve met up with Jesus’ family though. They showed up at his door in Capernaum with the intention of bringing him home because they thought he’d gone out of his mind. They’d heard of Jesus’ preaching and teaching and healing. They’d heard he was the leader of a dangerous movement – dangerous for him and his followers, that is. Jesus was challenging the thinking and practices of the established religious and political powers. He was telling everyone that the long-awaited fullness of God’s kingdom was arriving. He was telling the people and showing the people what this perfection looks like and how to get it. That was a problem – a big problem for the wealthy powerful leaders in that part of the globe. It was a problem because the power of God’s kingdom is the power of love and peace. The wealth of God’s kingdom is the riches of mercy and forgiveness, of sharing everything rather than accumulating. It is a “turn the world upside down” message and that message wasn’t welcome in a time when money made the world go ‘round – causing oppression, injustice, power imbalances, war, political corruption – but, hang on...that sounds like our world, doesn’t it?

Well, that message that wasn’t welcomed by the elite was being welcomed by a whole lot of “regular folk” – hardworking people like James and John and Peter, openminded people like Jairus whose daughter Jesus healed last week, desperate people like the outcast, dirt poor woman who touched the fringe of Jesus’ cloak and was healed...lots of people were eager to hear his message and so, his family

got their wish, there he was, home for the weekend and ready to share the good news of God's arriving kingdom to the "regular folk" of Nazareth.

Things seemed to start off well. He was teaching in their synagogue on the Sabbath and the people were astounded. We've heard this before – he's been teaching in other synagogues and amazing people, astonishing people with his authority. It sounds good...the people in Nazareth are astounded as well but the Greek word here actually is not so good. The word used [exeplēssonto] means panicked or shocked...they were astounded alright but not happily so. "Where's this coming from?" they ask. Where is he getting this authority, this wisdom, this power? Perhaps they were thinking along the same lines as the scribes who earlier try to convince people that Jesus' gifts and talents are demonic in nature...certainly not from God, the people of Nazareth are sure of that. They know this guy and he's nothing special.

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?" That one sentence speaks volumes. Is not this the carpenter – the working class nobody just like the rest of us? Is this not Mary's son – he's not Joseph's son, you know. She was pregnant with someone else's baby when he married her you know. Is this not the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and a few sisters as well – the eldest son who left the rest of his family instead of supporting them, instead of living up to his eldest son responsibilities? He ran off to lead some rebellion against the powerful in Jerusalem...he's just going to get himself killed you know. Yah, we know this guy and he's nothing special – he can't possibly be from God. God wouldn't come among us like this, would he?

Unbelief...if God were real, he wouldn't let wars happen. If God were good he would cure every disease, prayers wouldn't go unanswered, he wouldn't be a carpenter from Nazareth. A people characterized by unbelief sounds like our world doesn't it?

Widespread unbelief and powerful people threatened by God's message of peace, love, and sharing all resources. So what are we to do? How do we proclaim the good news of God's arriving kingdom like Jesus tells us to? How do we hasten the coming fulness of this kingdom when half the world doesn't want to listen and the other half listens but doesn't believe?

Jesus is amazed by their unbelief. He marvels at it. He has put before them the path leading to a life of wholeness, of complete reconciliation, of always having enough of what we need, a life of peace...and amazingly, they choose not to walk it. "And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." There is a big nugget of hope and inspiration in that statement that, perhaps, we may overlook in our amazement that Jesus' power seems to be connected to the belief of the people around him.

"Your faith has made you well." We heard that when he healed the woman who'd been hemorrhaging for 12 years. Your faith has made you well. Your belief in me – your trust and reliance and confidence in me has made you well. The people of Nazareth do not possess the belief in Jesus as the one come from God to redeem the world and so he could do no deed of power there." "If people repent – turn their minds Godward – the conditions for healing are satisfied," Professor Clifton Black (workingpreacher.org) tells us. "If they refuse to entrust themselves to the

good news, delivered by unlikely agents [like the local boy, the carpenter raised among them] then Jesus can do little more but marvel at their faithlessness.”

That would be discouraging for us if were not for the very next bit that Mark writes: “except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” Jesus is not left powerless by the unbelief of others. God does not force himself on people. God’s power hasn’t disappeared in this story. The people didn’t want to see it, didn’t want to experience it. Why not? Because they were putting limits on God. God wasn’t fitting the box they had designed for him – the box that said he could not possibly be found in the flesh of a simple carpenter they’d seen grow into a man, couldn’t possibly be found in someone from the small, insignificant village of Nazareth. And we shake our heads and think, “Wow, how could you be so blind? We know that God made flesh was Jesus of Nazareth. You shouldn’t have clung so close-mindedly to your God in a box. You can’t put limits on God.

Well, that’s very good advice, isn’t it? It’s too bad we don’t follow our own advice. Christianity, in general, suffers much from this God in a box syndrome. We have a few different boxes we’ve built for God. There’s the box for the God who could heal every disease, stop children from dying of cancer, fix everything and make the world perfect with a snap of his fingers but chooses not to. There’s the box for the angry God who sent his Son to die an excruciating death to pay him for our sins. And then there’s the box for the hate-filled God who excludes people who are different, who have something “wrong” with them and tortures people after death in a fiery underworld called hell. I could on...

And then Christians sit back and scratch their heads and wonder why people don’t want to have anything to do with these “Gods” we’ve created and shoved into our

boxes. I just love the blunt words of Mahatma Ghandi: I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians.

For those of us who realize that people try to create a God who fits into one or more boxes, putting human limits on our limitless God, it is very frustrating and it is very difficult to erase those limits once they've been widely accepted by mainstream thinking. But Jesus doesn't get frustrated. He marvels at their unbelief and then he went about the other villages teaching. What probably struck the disciples as a major setback, a huge blow to being able to proclaim the good news of the arriving kingdom, didn't phase Jesus at all. He moved on, continuing to sow seeds in other places. The word of God, as Jesus told his listeners in an earlier parable, the word of God when lavishly sowed always yields a harvest (Mark 4:1-20). God can and will accomplish God's purpose in spite of us at times but also with us. There are many willing workers in God's kingdom and we are among them.

As we watch Jesus today, shrugging off the unbelief of those who are intimately familiar with him, we also watch with interest as he expands his ministry, empowering his disciples and sending them off to do exactly what he had been doing: preaching the kingdom and healing the sick. Their lack of clothes and money ensures that they must rely on God's goodness working through the people they encounter, in order to survive this mission entrusted to them. Jesus wisely advises them to do as he just did when they are confronted with unbelief: shake the dust off your feet and move on.

Together as the Church, we are the community authorized by Jesus to speak and act on his behalf and that is a huge responsibility but it is also very exciting. It's a

tough job – we do indeed live in a world of empire, filled with powerful people who will reject our message of good news because it threatens their power. And we do indeed live in a Nazareth world – filled with unbelief for a wide variety of reasons. We will not let this dishearten or discourage us. We will shake the dust off our feet and continue to proclaim in word and action God’s arriving kingdom. God’s word will yield a harvest.

We also must pay attention to the lesson learned through the unbelief of the Nazarenes. Their familiarity with Jesus and their unbending expectations of who God is and what God will do kept them from seeing the powerful deeds of Jesus among them. God does not fit into the human boxes created to contain him. God can be in the generosity of a wealthy parishioner and in the gratitude of the homeless person saying, “God bless you” as she accepts your gift. God is with us *and* God is among those excluded by other Christians. When communities start thinking they can decide who God would allow in his kingdom and who God would not allow in they are putting God into their box – limiting God based on their thinking.

Mark shows us in his Gospel that Jesus’ ministry continued in households rather than synagogues as his teachings and healings in the formal religious centers were scoffed at and criticized by the people who felt they knew God really well – their familiarity closed their minds to Jesus. Established religious traditions and authorities are not always inclined to new ideas and activities that may have represented a new move of God. Even as we experience change and newness, we must guard against the pitfall the people of Nazareth fell into. We must not let our

familiarity with customs and traditions and thinking of what “church” should be, blind us to the creativity of God who continuously makes all things new.

The God we expect is the God we will get. The Nazarenes expected nothing so they got nothing. Let us expect newness and wonder, finding our powerful God in the extraordinary and the ordinary. Let us expect our loving God to be among us. Let us expect our abundantly generous God to carry us through every stumble and to fulfill our every need. Let us expect our faithful God to bring the perfect peace, love, and joy of the fullness of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven. The God we expect is the God we will get.