

“Preconceived Notions”

Mark 6:1-6

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July 4th has always been one of my favorite holidays. It's such a hometown kinda day. My hometown is Upper Arlington, and the 4th of July is a huge celebration there. There's a parade in the morning, neighborhood picnics all afternoon, and a community-wide celebration in the park before the fireworks put a cap on the day. There is such a sense of community, and I can usually count on seeing just about everyone I know at some point during the day-long festivities. And so I can't help but to think of the connection between Jesus' homecoming in today's passage and my experiences of homecoming on the 4th of July.

One thing that helps the community homecoming feel in my hometown is the fact that class reunions are always held on the 4th of July weekend. So as you are watching the parade, you will see floats for the 5-year, 10-year, 15-year, all the way up to the 60- or 65-year class reunions.

Many of you have experienced a high school reunion or two, and so you know what fun they can be. It's always interesting to see how things have changed over the years. In my class, there were some geniuses that everyone knew would continue to be brilliant, and they are, but it's also interesting to see that those kids you used to envy in high school because of their good looks or athleticism may not be so enviable any more. Of course, it's especially nice to connect with your old friends and see what they have done with their lives.

When you attend a reunion, and you're connecting with your old classmates, there are some pretty standard conversation topics: where you are living now, what's your family status (married, children, etc), and what do you do for a living? I will always remember my 15-year reunion because it was my first reunion after I began my life in ministry. When each of my conversations eventually came around to what we are doing for a living, I was always a little anxious about giving my response. I wasn't sure what they would think. Would they respond like Jesus' hometown friends? Would they be enthusiastic, or would they respond with comments like, “Wait, you're Jeff Allen, right? Weren't you that kid who was in the marching band? I thought you got a business degree or something like that. What makes you think you can be a minister?” I'm not sure I thought they would say something like that directly to me, but I couldn't help but feel like that's what they were saying on the inside, or to other classmates.

Unless you were a part of a huge high school, you were probably known by your classmates. If your class was relatively big, you might not have known everyone well, but you tend to know what groups people hang around with, and we tend to make generalizations about people when we can identify them with a particular group, don't we?

The people from Jesus' hometown knew him. They didn't know him as others did, because of his reputation for teaching and preaching, they knew him because he was a hometown kid. And so they classified him according to all the familiar categories – Mary's son, James' brother, that carpenter.

But something was different about Jesus this time. He was teaching with wisdom and authority. He was performing deeds of power. It just didn't fit with what they expected of Jesus. It didn't fit their preconceived notions of who he was or what he could do.

There's another element to the culture of Jesus' time that can be helpful in understanding this episode in Jesus' life. In peasant villages, there was a culture of honor and shame that can provide some insight into the crowd's hostile reaction. It's difficult for us to completely understand because it's different from our culture. It is more like the caste system in India, but not exactly the same.

The term we translate as "carpenter" could also be used to describe anyone who works in wood or other hard materials in the process of building things. Therefore, Jesus' status in the community as a local craftsman would have been considerably lower than that of a member of the educated class. He had stepped out of the status and role that he had in their society and villagers commonly resented those who attempted to elevate their position above that to which they are entitled by birth. It just wasn't right for someone to seek a higher level of honor than they were due.

So when the villagers reflect on who Jesus was in categories familiar to them (the carpenter, son of Mary, brother to the neighbors named), their initial astonishment turned to rejection. Even outside of a culture of honor and shame, when simply measured by the criteria set by the world as to what a religious leader worth his salt ought to be, Jesus simply did not stand up well. He wasn't successful enough or influential enough or prestigious enough.

So how does this text connect with our experience today? I think there are two main ways that it does. First and foremost, I think this passage is a word of hope to those of us who have been limited by people's preconceived notions of who we are.

Have people tried to define and confine you by putting you in their little boxes? Maybe it's the box of your occupation, or the "I knew her growing up" box, or the "I know his family" box. It can be especially evident when we still live where we were brought up, or when we have lived somewhere a long time, or when we have been working in the same position for many years. If you have experienced any of these circumstances or others, you may know what it feels like to be restricted by the expectations of those around you. Communities can be wonderful places of belonging, but they also can have the power to cramp and diminish possibilities. The wet blanket thrown by those who think they know you can be crippling. The reality is that often the people who think they know you may hardly know anything about the miracle that is really you!

And so we can take comfort in the fact that Jesus himself faced the same kind of difficulty in his life. Jesus knows the struggle to live into your calling despite what others might say about you – even those you’ve known all your life. Jesus shows us that it is possible to rise above other’s preconceived notions of us, and that gives us hope.

We can take confidence in who we know ourselves to be. We can delight in the person that God is calling us to be, even when others who think they know us may not see us in that role. God is calling us through this text this morning to stop listening to voices that might limit us through their preconceived notions of us, to stop listening to the voices that only serve to limit our possibilities and our potential. God is calling us to through this text to take confidence in ourselves and step into the fullness of life and service that God so desires for us.

The second way I think this text interacts with our experiences today is to remind us of our own preconceived notions about Jesus. We sometimes become so comfortable with our understanding of Jesus that we can miss out on the fullness of who Jesus is. The scripture says that Jesus could do no works of power in his hometown, except for a couple of exceptions. I think the same is true for us. We often miss experiencing the fullness of Jesus’ power because of our own preconceived notions of him.

In general, I think we tend to see what we expect to see and are slow to accept challenges to our preconceived notions. Let me give a simple example. Answer the following questions quickly to yourself. What color are the clouds? What color is my shirt? What color is on the American flag other than red and blue? What do cows drink? How many of you answered “milk” to that last one? Now you know that cows drink water, don’t you? So why did you answer “milk”? Because you had an expectation, a preconceived notion, of what the answer was based on past questions.

We sometimes have the same thing with Jesus and/or God. We can tend to think we’ve got Jesus pretty much figured out, and so we put him in a nice little box, limiting his power by our preconceived notions of him. We can tend to think God acts only in certain ways, and so we put God in a box and limit the ways we can experience God.

The fact is that Jesus can be surprising when we really pay attention to him. Let me give you an example. Think about the scene with the woman accused of adultery that people want to stone. The scribes and Pharisees had brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus and said, “The law says we should stone this woman, what do you say?” For those who know the story, how does Jesus respond? By saying “those without sin cast the first stone?” Not yet! When they ask him the question, the scripture says that Jesus simply bent down and began writing in the ground with his finger. The scribes and Pharisees had to continue questioning Jesus before he finally straightened up and said “Let those of you who are without sin cast the first stone.” Then what does Jesus do? He bends back down and continues writing in the sand while the crowd slowly leaves the scene, one by one, until it was just Jesus alone with the accused woman. Only then does Jesus stop writing in the ground and look around.

We think we know the story, or at least we have a preconceived notion of how Jesus acts in this scene. But when we really look at what the scripture says about Jesus, we find something different. Why does Jesus behave in this way? Why does he seem to ignore the situation and busy himself writing on the ground instead of confronting the issue at hand? Well, that's another issue for another sermon. I bring up the scene simply to highlight the fact that we can miss the fullness of who Jesus is by allowing our preconceived notions to limit our experience of him.

The same is true of our experience of God. Sometimes we think that God can only be experienced or known in certain ways, and I think we lose sight of the fact that God is present in the most ordinary things and is displayed by the most ordinary people, and that includes you and me. We must not let our preconceived notions limit our experience of God, and that is our call to Christian discipleship for today.

God is calling us to cast aside all preconceived notions about who we are, about who other people are, about who Jesus is, about who God is. Instead, let us experience the fullness of God through our openness to see and experience God, and Jesus, and other people, and even ourselves in new ways. One of the ways I like to think about God is that God is the ultimate "greater than." Our preconceived notions serve only to limit. God is always greater than. There is always more to understand and to experience about God.

One of the ways we remind ourselves of this reality is to take the ordinary things of life – bread and juice – things that we might think would have no real power in our lives, things that are so common that they could not possibly represent God to us, and yet through the sacrament of Holy Communion, we are able to experience God in such ways that we can only describe them as a "holy mystery." Maybe communion is an area where you have a preconceived notion about your experience of God. If so, as we participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion together today, I invite you to cast aside your preconceived notions about this holy meal, and to experience some more of the fullness of God in new and fresh ways.