

“Deeds of Power”

Mark 6: 1 – 13

Makemie Presbyterian Church

July 5, 2009

He (that is Jesus) left that place & came to his hometown & his disciples followed him. <sup>2</sup>On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue & many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! <sup>3</sup>Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary & brother of James & Joses & Judas & Simon & are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, & among their own kin, & in their own house.” <sup>5</sup>And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people & cured them. <sup>6</sup>And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. <sup>7</sup>He called the twelve & began to send them out two by two & gave them authority over the unclean spirits. <sup>8</sup>He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; <sup>9</sup>but to wear sandals & not to put on two tunics. <sup>10</sup>He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. <sup>11</sup>If any place will not welcome you & they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” <sup>12</sup>So they went out & proclaimed that all should repent. <sup>13</sup>They cast out many demons & anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

This ends the reading.

The first time I preached it was the Sunday after Christmas 1995. I stood outside on the lanai watching the big palm trees rustle in the breeze. I totted up the huge Bible that somehow always looked small in Lacy's hands & prepared to walk down the long middle aisle, climb the steps to the pulpit & begin. Even though it was a warm December day, my hands were ice cold & my heart was pounding so hard I thought the microphone would pick it up. The liturgist, Stuart McKinney stood beside me, tall red-headed multi-freckled, laid back & nonchalant. "Let's go" he said.

I thought about backing out, but decided that nothing short of death could save me at that late hour. The powerful chords of the pipe organ began to vibrate throughout the building. Better to preach than to die, I decided, so we moved through the doors & I preached for all I was worth. Afterward, I was lavished with praise, given hugs from my Sunday school teachers, while one older gentleman & former pastor said, "Keep the simplicity" whatever that means. But the response was good. Before that day, I had tried to convince myself that the response of the people was not that important. So what if they didn't like me. But I realized that it mattered what my home church thought & it was vitally important that they *hear* me.

The encouragement I received that day was sweet, warm & a little puzzling; nothing like the welcome home Jesus received.

Our text this morning comes immediately after Jesus heals the woman who had suffered for 12 years from hemorrhages & raises the Jairus' daughter. Right after these two miracles, Jesus goes home to Nazareth accompanied by his disciples. It's Friday night & Jesus is coming into his home town & home sanctuary. Let me tell you, the service that night was jammed. The donkeys circled the parking lot looking for a stall but there were no parking stalls to be found. The parking lot was full. There were so many people in church that they ran out of bulletins. They put chairs up in the center of the aisles. It was crowded, because the "local rabbi made good" is back in town.

And then Jesus read the passage from Isaiah 61; clearly outlining the important values in his ministry. Jesus then rolled the scroll closed. There was a looooong silence, and he said: "These words are fulfilled in your hearing." He preached a sermon on that text & afterwards he heard, "Where did he get all of this!" And still another said, "Where did he get so wise?"

And pretty soon, according to the passage, “they took offense at him.” That is the key word of the text: offense. In Greek, it is “skandalon” from which we get the word, “scandal.” Scandal also means “stumbling block.” This is a key word, scandalon or stumbling block.

Boiling waters began to brew. Some people in the synagogue were thinking: “He could do all those miracles there in Capernaum but he can’t do any miracles here in Nazareth.”

And Jesus said, “A prophet is not accepted in his own home. A prophet is not accepted in his own home congregation. A prophet is not accepted in his own hometown. The reason that I don’t do miracles here in Nazareth is because of your lack of faith.

Jesus was amazed at their unbelief.

And the people were mad at Jesus. They were honked off. They took deep offense at Jesus. The congregational members had come in with such high expectations. Jesus was on a huge religious roll; the church was jammed; the parking lot was full; they ran out of bulletins, but by the end of the night, they were ready to kill the dude.

Jesus must have said something that really got on their nerves. When Jesus quoted Isaiah 61:1 that passage was about the Messiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor people.” The “me” in that sentence was the Messiah. Jesus was saying that he was none other than the long expected Messiah and that REALLY offended them.

He was claiming that he was the long awaited Messiah, and the people weren't ready to accept him. “Come on. He watered our donkeys. He cleaned our yards. No way he it's him. How can this Jesus-guy come back & be the Messiah? Not little Jesus of Nazareth. Not the little boy that we used to go fishing with & swimming with & hiking with. Not the neighborhood boy who delivered our papers. How could God come in such a common & ordinary way? Jesus doesn't measure up to our expectations of what it means to be a messiah.

The people there that day were offended by the Incarnation, that God actually became a human being. That was the scandal, the stumbling block. To believe that God could come to us through a human being is pushing it. And that is what so deeply offended the people. The Incarnation: that God would come in the flesh of a man they knew, a man by the name of Jesus from the town of Nazareth.

But I would like to take it a step further & give you an example from when I was a lowly mission worker & saw the Reverend Ramiro Ros & how we continue to be offended that God comes to us in such a common & ordinary ways. It is an example, that could happen recently, as recently as a week ago, a month ago, a dozen years ago, or yesterday. It's happened too many times. As a part of my training in ministry, Ramiro would let me be the fly on the wall during some of his counseling sessions.

A man came in to see Ramiro and this is the conversation they had. The fellow, let's call him, Jose, told Ramiro he was having an affair with another woman. His wife didn't know about it. How he & his wife hadn't gotten along :”forever.” She didn't understand him. How he was looking for direction. It was pretty clear what was going on.

He asked: “What do you think that God wants me to do?” And Ramiro, took a deep breath & said, “It seems to me that this is God wants you to do: cut off the affair & make up your marriage with your wife.”

And he replied, “I just wish God would tell me what to do.”

The husband comes a second time. He explains his problem again & and says, “I wish that God would tell me what to do.”

Ramiro repeats, slowly what the man needs to do. He doesn't hear. A third time the scene is repeated. "I am having problems with an affair and I wish God would tell me what to do."

Ramiro once again tells him what he should do, and he says, "I wish God would speak directly to my life & tell me what to do."

And finally Ramiro says: "Hey, friend, God has been talking directly to you, but you aren't listening."

And he said, "No, I want God really to talk to me."

"Friend, God has really been talking to you."

He said, "No, I want to hear God's voice."

Ramiro says, "You just did."

But somehow, it offended this man that God could come in such a common & ordinary way as a parish pastor. Especially a God who says what we don't want to hear. (Can't be God, right?)

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath & the people are amazed both at his teaching & the accounts of healings. For a moment or two it would appear that a warm celebration of "hometown boy makes

good" is about to erupt. But it's not to be. What happens is rejection, the same kind of rejection that dogs his trail all the way to Good Friday.

"Jesus could do no deeds of power . . . because of their unbelief."

Isn't strange how "deeds of power" and "belief" are so solidly linked?  
Isn't strange how hardened hearts can cut even God off at the pass.

The people of Nazareth start asking, "Where did he get all of this?" or as the text Ted just read puts it: "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! <sup>3</sup>Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, (and aren't his sisters in the band at Snow Hill High School)?" And they took offense at him.

It's easy enough to deal with this under the heading of "familiarity breeds contempt." Jesus even invites that spin with his "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country." Yet there is an issue here that runs much deeper and with greater, even devastating import. The issue is the scandal of the incarnation. It hounded Galilean hearts and minds then, as it hounds us now. "The word made flesh" is both our salvation & the one of the greatest bugaboos of modern faith.

Yes, by God! He *was* the carpenter. He *was* the brother of James and Simon. The grand wonder of the incarnation is that that is precisely how he gets to be your brother and mine. But downtown Nazareth was having none of that. And downtown Snow Hill and downtown D.C. aren't all that comfortable with it either. The mystery of the incarnation holds our greatest solace and comfort, namely that wherever we go in suffering, in hurt and sorrow and despair, God has gone there first, goes with us, shows up (!), and is there with us and for us.

It is amazing that the first great heresy in the church was not the denial of Christ's divinity, but the denial of his full humanity. The Nicene Creed addresses that heresy (docetism). Yet we still struggle with it, maybe with less justification than did Nazareth. We want a two-fisted God who comes up like thunder, and we are offended by one who puts himself/herself at our mercy and who now and then looks a lot like our Uncle Fred.

Yes, his mama was Mary, and he had sisters and brothers with names and faces and backaches. The Gospels proclaim that God was his father, and he proclaimed that God is your father and mother too, and mine, and everyone's. When we begin to really believe that, when we seek God in the ordinary, daily wash of things and find God in nothing more complicated

than each other and in God's beautiful, dangerous, gorgeous creation, "mighty deeds of power " may begin to happen. Works of mercy and compassion. Works of healing and commiseration. Works of forgiveness and understanding and of great laughter. Frederick Buechner was right, I believe, in asserting that miracles do not evoke faith so much as faith evokes miracles.

What that poor crowd of Nazarenes was cutting off at the pass had to do not only with God, but with their neighbors and spouses and children, and whatever they knew of community. It was probably a world where anyone who cooked was just a cook, any tradesman just a competitor, any lawyer just a crook, any politician just out hiking. Anyone's wife was just a woman, anyone's daughter was a nuisance. It was a bleak world, with little wonder, brief if any enticing mystery, no great expectations and wispy hope. They seem to have suffered not only a loss of nerve (which may be another word for faith) but also a loss of awareness -- of consciousness.

When Emily Webb, in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, comes back from the dead to the town of her childhood and finds her mother and father and all her long-dead acquaintances still "alive" and the town and its environs the same as when she was a child, she begs to go back to the grave. The

sheer beauty and wonder of it all -- every sight and sound, every tender grace of things, every gesture of love and devotion -- is overwhelming. It is too much for her to bear, for she had never realized the miracle of her life when she was living it.

Maybe that was the case in Nazareth. Maybe most of the time that's the case with us too, Maybe we need to go back to our lessons from safety patrol; Stop, look and listen! Know a prophet when you see one; learn the wondrous truth when you hear it. Most of us are called to be prophets at some point in our lives, but for some it is a more consistent calling. The consequence of the call to prophecy is often isolation & rejection from those who are closest, our family. Cousin Bernie can't be a spokesperson of God, how preposterous!

Jesus Christ was a prophet who not only spoke the will of God, but lived it in his very person. Many people, including his family rejected him. His family wanted to put him away quietly. Those with authority in the community found him to be a right pain & wanted rid of him. Even his disciples misunderstood him & could not grasp the nature of his ministry of dying & rising rather than sword drawn, blood & guts conquistador.

It is all too easy to assume we, in the church, respond well & eagerly to the prophets amongst us today. It is easy for us to assume we, in the church, are the prophetic voice of God now. Yet our gospel reading challenges us to take heed. It is those who are kin and from Christ's own house who reject him. Anyone who does the will of my Father says Jesus is my mother, my brother and sister. So we as disciples today are part of Christ's family. There is a great risk that we limit Christ's power amongst us by our over familiarity with him; that in the church as in Jesus' home town it is more difficult for the Spirit of Christ to be shown in power; except for the occasional healing. Is Jesus even now amazed at our unbelief?

And so, Jesus says to the disciples, "If any place will not welcome you & they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

Today's gospel reading describes Jesus going to the temple to pray on the Sabbath. He stands up & begins to read the words of Isaiah & before you know it; the people are whispering & questioning not only his authority but also his wisdom.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus was not looking for attention. He was simply observing the Sabbath in the tradition of his hometown. He was

not healing the great multitudes as he had been; he only laid his hands on a few, curing them. And he was amazed at their lack of belief. He made a very powerful statement, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometowns."

The community is so busy judging the package that they miss the most essential part, the divine human, Jesus, as the Messiah.

And what if Jesus had become disgruntled? Had decided not to pursue his calling any longer? What if he said, "That's the final straw." Where would we be right now? Not here, that's for sure. But Jesus kept on. He never gave up. In the words of baseball legend Hank Aaron, he "kept swinging." He was committed; to us & to God. And so here we are. And here we belong. Amen.