

All too familiar

Mark 6:1-6

July 9, 2006

Tomorrow, Lynne and I begin our summer vacation together, spending several days in Michigan for Matt's wedding, and then traveling on to Maine. In Maine, we will spend time with my mother and visit old friends. We will paddle the bays in our sea kayaks, eat our fill of fresh seafood, go hiking with the dog, and comb the beaches for sea glass and pottery shards.

It will be our fifth trip to Maine in six years, but we had lived in Iowa for over three years before we returned to our former home state for the first time. We returned to Maine in the summer of 1998 to visit family and to lay the groundwork for a confirmation mission trip later that summer.

I remember well that first trip back. I remember well our reaction as we drove alongside Blue Hill Bay at Parker Point or lunched at the Jordan Pond House overlooking the mountains of Acadia National Park or explored the nooks and crannies at L. L. Bean or gazed at the sailboats in Camden Harbor. We looked at each other and said, *We lived here?* It was all so beautiful, so captivating! It was as if we were seeing Maine for the first time, as if we had never really seen it before or never fully appreciated it before. We were "outsiders" now, folks "from away," and we saw the Maine that used to be our home with new eyes.

Sometimes perceptions are dulled by familiarity. It's a common malady, expressed in numerous proverbs: *Familiarity breeds contempt ... You can't see what's right under your nose ... You don't know what you have until you lose it ... Absence makes the heart grow fonder.* What we have, we often take for granted. We see, but don't see.

It's not a difference in what is seen, but in how we see it. We see the same things everybody sees, but we don't pay attention, we don't appreciate what we are seeing. So it's not a question of access to the facts, that I miss what you see. The facts, the reality, are there for all to see. It's a question of the ways we interpret what we are seeing, of the ways we choose or choose not to pay careful attention to what we are seeing, of the ways we choose or choose not to believe the reality that we do see.

The people of Nazareth saw Jesus, but didn't see him. What an astonishing paradox! His own neighbors, the people who should know him best, don't really know him at all. It's not that they can't see what everybody else sees, they do. They are amazed at his words. They recognize his wisdom. They know of his miracles.

But they reject him. They will not put their faith in him ... because he is all too familiar to them. They see the very same things that are getting folks so excited throughout the region of Galilee, but they have already decided what Jesus can and cannot be.

We know his mother. We know his brothers and his sisters. He's the carpenter, just the carpenter. We don't know about all this other stuff he is doing, but we do know who and what he is!

It's not about what they see, but about what they choose to see.

Some of us think it would be so much easier to believe if we had been there, if we had seen Jesus with our own eyes, if we had witnessed his teaching and his miracles with our own eyes.

I don't think so. I think that faith was more difficult for Jesus' contemporaries. They had to reconcile Jesus' claims of authority to heal diseases and forgive sins, his easy way of speaking for God and with God, his demand for undivided allegiance, with the young man standing there before them, the man just like them, the man no different from them, Mary's kid. Faith in Jesus must have come harder for them and, often, at greater cost, but when it did come, it would be genuine.

Sometimes the object of our faith is not Jesus at all, but a storybook figure, a product of our own imaginations, our own wishful thinking. Jesus is real, stubbornly real, and the real Jesus does not fit comfortably into the boxes we have reserved for him. Faith in the real Jesus does not come easily and faith in the real Jesus will cost us. It is not failure of seeing that causes us to hesitate, but failure of faith. Our readiness to believe is not held back by what we do not yet see, but by what we will not yet acknowledge, not by lack of evidence, but by lack of trust.

Jesus was greatly surprised that the people did not have faith. On one level, he was not surprised: *Prophets are respected everywhere except in their own hometown ...* But even though Jesus understands that, he is still surprised. They do see. Why will they not believe?

Mark's gospel reports that Jesus was not able to perform any miracles there. He was ready, but the people were not, and Jesus is no showman, no magician, no crusader. He will not push his way in where he is not welcomed. Jesus is ready to offer God's good gifts to those who are eager to receive them. He acts in concert with faith.

So why is it that there was so little faith among the people of Nazareth? What prevents people from acknowledging the truth that is staring them in the face?

Is it envy? That we have to hold everybody down to our own level of mediocrity to spare our egos?

Is it pride? That we don't want any reward we have not earned for ourselves, that we won't accept any truth we have not figured out for ourselves?

Is it fear? Fear of letting go, fear of leaving ourselves wholly in the hands of Another, an Other we know so well, and yet cannot begin to know?

I am surprised. I am surprised by the lack of faith among us, about the lack of depth in the faith we do have. Is the story all too familiar? Is Jesus all too familiar?

We know the story. We have heard it told so many times. We have had every opportunity, every advantage, but we do not have faith! We pass Jesus by, treating the story as if it holds little significance, little relevance, for our lives as they are ... the story of a God who sets aside everything and makes every sacrifice for the sake of the creation and the creatures God loves! ... the story of a God who is defined by love, a God who defines love, a love that knows no limits and no end, a love that can never be overcome or turned back! ... the story of a promised day, a day when all things (all things!) will be made new, a day of *shalom*!

How can we not see what is staring us in the face? How can we not appreciate the utter power and stunning beauty of what God has already done for us? How can we possibly hear this story and go, *huh?*

I remember talking with a group of ministers one Easter season. They were lamenting having to prepare another Easter sermon, because, after all, what can be said that hasn't already been said? Say it again! Say it again and again and again! It is good news! May we never tire of telling the story of God's triumph over the powers arrayed against us! May we never tire of singing the wonders of God's grace!

It is a beautiful story, a startlingly beautiful story, a story so beautiful, so compelling, so transforming that it cannot not be true! Today, may you hear the story once more, this time as if for the very first time. Today, may you see Jesus once more, this time as if for the very first time. Today, may our familiarity with the story be no obstacle to genuine faith. May we be ready to see what is there to see!