

Proper 9B – July 5, 2015
2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

History is full of examples of good and/or gifted people being put down or cast out by those who supposedly know them best. There is something about familiarity that can breed this kind of contempt. For example, as one commentator put it,

“Louisa May Alcott’s family thought she was hardly educable and encouraged her to find work as a seamstress or house-servant...Charles Darwin wrote in his autobiography, ‘I was considered by all my masters [teachers] and my father a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard in intellect’...[And] the father of the sculptor, [August] Rodin, said, ‘I have an idiot for a son’...[Just three examples among countless others]...Sadly, it is precisely when we think we know another completely that we become most susceptible to faulty judgment; or, as is often the situation, of underestimating the capacity of the other to grow, develop, change and become surprisingly more wonderful and gifted than ever we expected them to be. This unfortunate penchant for labeling and thereby unjustly limiting the potential of others has claimed not [just] a few victims through the centuries”ⁱ— those victims being not only the ones who were labeled but also those doing the labeling.

Today we read of Jesus’ hometown neighbors who, although acknowledging Jesus’ work and wisdom, cannot accept him as anyone beyond this “carpenter, the son of Mary,” who lives nearby. They cannot fit their familiarity with his relatives and his ordinary life among them with their preconceptions of what the Messiah must be like. And elsewhere in Mark’s gospel (3:20-35), Jesus finds that his own family misunderstands him as much, even going as far as trying to curtail his public ministry.

The result of such familiarity among neighbors and family and their perceptions of who Jesus was and what he was doing bred a type of contempt that precluded faith and limited the exercise of Jesus’ power! Even the omnipotent God is impotent in an atmosphere that is hostile in its unbelief. Jesus isn’t just encountering here a type of ambivalence. God has always been able to act with, in and through human beings who have had ambivalence—just look at the lives of Moses, David, Jeremiah, Ruth, Mary and Thomas to name a few. Doubt and vacillation were part and parcel of each of their journeys of faith. Such ambivalence means both an attraction to, and an aversion from, at the same time. An example of this is summarized well by the father of the epileptic boy who cries out to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!”ⁱⁱ This kind of ambivalence is precisely what God can and does work with in most of us most of the time.

But it’s a different kind of dividedness that Jesus encounters in today’s gospel text. It happens when lifelong, entrenched habits or patterns of thinking defend themselves at all costs against a new reality. When such familiarity breeds contempt to the degree that a mean, reactionary refusal of reality sets in, then, it appears, God can do little good that can be received and accepted. The closed mind, the in-built prejudice, the refusal to see

and accept the new possibilities in others or ourselves—all this can prevent healing, wholeness and justice from happening.ⁱⁱⁱ In every generation this is compounded by various spirits of the age, as it were, ideologies or dogmas that, for example, are often interwoven with nationalist, racist and religious “certainties”—be it in the vast capitulation of the German and Austrian churches and their people to the Nazi state and its warped ideology; or in the complicit role of white churches, for the most part, in apartheid South Africa, or in the American deep South in the perpetuation of Jim Crow segregation and other forms of overt racism—or, for example, in the significant denial on the part of many Evangelical and/or Fundamentalist Christians of the realities of evolution and of climate change. Elsewhere, when Jesus confronted the Sadducees, he said to them—and to all of us—“Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?”^{iv}

Such hostile unbelief also limits, it seems, the power of God. And so, as Mark says about Jesus in his hometown community, “And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief” (Mark 6:5-6). The notion that our closed minds can somehow prevent God’s power from being effective, at least for a time (sometimes a life-time), is an amazing one. God acts and we act and something happens. But if we don’t act at all, nothing happens. Again, as St. Augustine put it, “Without God we cannot. And without us, God will not.”^v This pattern is found throughout Scripture. It even starts in creation. God does not do all the creating, but shares and empowers the creative work of others. Interestingly, creation, according to the creation story in Genesis, Chapter 1, happens not only through God but through other parts of creation. God says, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants...and fruit trees” (Genesis 1:11). The earth itself becomes a co-creator with God. And on Day Five, as the story goes, God invites the waters to become part of the creative process: “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures” (Genesis 1:20). And finally God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’...male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply...’” (Genesis 1:26-28). Thus God creates a complex interdependent community. God is the conductor of a cosmic orchestra, empowering other members of creation to join in the creative process.

And in the New Testament, remember the example of Jesus and the crowd of 5,000. The multiplication of the loaves and fishes only happens when Jesus’ disciples elicit food *first* from the crowd themselves. The sharing by the people as they open themselves to Jesus is what begins the multiplication—a great deed of power.

Or, finally, remember the Risen Jesus walking down the road to Emmaus with the two discouraged friends. Only when *they initiate* by inviting Jesus to dinner, and only when they open their “burning” hearts that he helped re-ignite, do they *then* break bread and recognize him fully (Luke 24:13-35).

God depends on partnerships to accomplish God’s creative, redemptive and sanctifying purposes on earth. Jesus himself—fully divine yet also fully human—is the prime example

of such a divine/human partnership. And the rest of humanity and creation make up the rest of this partnership.

This reality that God's power needs our human cooperation of faith and love, no matter how ambivalent and faltering, is crucial to understanding how God interacts with us as individuals and as a community, and as a wider society and world.^{vi}

I want to mention one other form of familiarity that breeds contempt and limits the power of God, namely the numbing apathy or cynicism or fatalism born of the realization that so much is wrong in our world and remain as big messy problems, seemingly without any way to address or solve them. And so we begin to accept injustice and misery. For many of us, nearly nine million of our fellow Americans unemployed is economically "realistic." Or, the more than 30,000 gun deaths per year, 3.5 million homeless during the year, more than 2.2 million incarcerated, and more than 45 million fellow Americans living below the poverty line are the sad realities we just have to live with. And on an international level, with wars aplenty, some 60 million fellow human beings have now become refugees. The general attitude says that we live in an imperfect, imbalanced society and world and there's not much we can or even should do about these big messy problems. But to the prophets and to Jesus—and throughout Scripture—even one hungry child, even one abused victim, one homeless family, even one person gunned down senselessly is a cry directly to God for justice, and to humankind to exercise responsibility to use our God-given gifts for the common good. What powerful deeds of God do we make ineffective by our complacency, our familiarity with the status quo and our privileged places within that?

Now, on this Fourth of July weekend, if someone wants to express doubt that people like me "love America" because of comments such as these, let me quote Carl Schurz, a former General, Cabinet Secretary, Ambassador, and Senator from Missouri, who said more than 140 years ago on the floor of the U.S. Senate: "The Senator from Wisconsin cannot frighten me by exclaiming, 'My country, right or wrong.' In one sense I say so too. My country; and my country is the great American Republic. My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; *and if wrong, to be set right.*"^{vii} Or as William Sloane Coffin put it, "The best patriots are not uncritical lovers of their country, any more than they are the loveless critics of it. True patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's eternal lover's quarrel with the entire world."^{viii}

It must finally be said that Jesus' lack of acceptance in his own hometown did not alter his message or deter his mission. He, and his disciples whom he also sent forth, simply continued to make the rounds of other villages, teaching and preaching and healing wherever they were welcomed, in season and out of season—when people listened, and when they refused to.^{ix}

ⁱ See Patricia Datchuck Sanchez, "He Was Too Much for Them" (Kansas City: Celebration Publications, 2000)

ⁱⁱ Mark 9:24

ⁱⁱⁱ While, on the one hand, God can and does work through doubt or ambivalence; on the other hand, in hostile and reactive disbelief, the power of God is made ineffective. This hostility toward God blocks the

faith not only of individuals but of whole communities—if we define faith as the open space in the hearts and minds of individuals and communities to receive the power and love of God working in and through us.

^{iv} Mark 12:24; cf. Matthew 22:29.

^v Quoted in Robert Edward Luccock, If God Be For Us: Sermons on the Gifts of the Gospel (New York: Harper, 1954). In Augustine's actual writings, the quote that comes closest to this is, "He who created you without you will not justify you without you." (in his 169th Sermon).

^{vi} I want to mention another form of familiarity that breeds contempt and limits the power of God—not only in individual minds and hearts but also in whole communities. There is a paralyzing pessimism about one's situation that can impair or shut down the vision of something better that could happen. We all know individuals, and maybe ourselves to an extent, in which a person's sense of possibilities for the future are so limited or shut down by their negative self-images both of themselves and their community. This happens in whole communities as well. For example, in Wilmington, Delaware our churches and other community leaders organized successfully to take back streets from drug-dealers—a significant deed of power—except in a couple of neighborhoods. And in those neighborhoods where we weren't successful, it's interesting to note the significant distress that pervaded—joblessness, absentee fathers, a culture of violence, drug-dependency, lack of adequate public transportation, lack of strong community-based institutions (churches, etc.)—but also the despair and pessimism that doubted anything could change. For many in these neighborhoods, their power of vision (of seeing positive change ahead) was limited by their vision of power (that they could accomplish anything) which was imbued with a deep sense of powerlessness, which, in the end, just invited further abuse upon itself. Attempts at bringing people together were difficult and nearly impossible to sustain. Now it may also be that the churches could do little or no deeds of power in a couple of these neighborhoods not only because of the persistent paralyzing pessimism and feeling of powerlessness in the neighborhood, but also because of unnecessary blockages caused by the churches themselves, for example, in not taking the necessary time of developing trusting relationships with the residents and neighborhood leaders.

^{vii} Senator Carl Schurz, quoted in *The Congressional Globe*, Vol. 45, p. 1287.

^{viii} William Sloane Coffin, The Heart is a Little to the Left (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 56-57.

^{ix} The following is a prayer by Jack Riemer entitled "Likrat Shabbat" that would have us understand how often we pray in ways of making God responsible for all the thinking, growing and doing that we ourselves should be undertaking and that God has empowered us to do:

"We cannot merely pray to you, O God,
to end war;
For we know that You have made the world
in a way
That man must find his own path to peace,
within himself and with his neighbor.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God,
to end starvation;
For You have already given us the
resources
With which to feed the entire world,
If we would only use them wisely.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God,
to root out prejudice;
For You have already given us eyes

With which to see the good in all men,
If we would only use them rightly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God,
to end despair,
For You have already given us the power
To clear away slums and to give hope,
If we would only use our power justly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God,
to end disease;
For You have already given us great minds
With which to search out cures and healing,
If we would only use them constructively.

Therefore we pray to You instead, O God,
For strength, determination and will power,
To do instead of just pray,
To become instead of merely to wish.”