

Reflection on Mark 6:1-6 Linda E Hunter

What are we to make of the reading from Mark? Let's begin with the obvious question: How could Jesus' family and friends reject him? They watched him grow up. They had to be aware of his loving nature and the fact that he worked hard. Before leaving home he was acknowledged as a rabbi, a teacher, and he had disciples whom he taught. Nazareth was only a short distance away from Capernaum. News travelled by word of mouth from one town to another and everyone was eager to hear and share what they heard.

Previously in Mark's gospel we have heard about the success of Jesus' ministry: how the crowds listened to his teachings, expressed in parables; how they witnessed the healing of the sick and the possessed, and how astounded they were when Jesus brought Jairus' daughter back from the dead. You may recall that in the synagogue at Capernaum the people were "amazed" and "accepted" his new way of teaching.

However, in Nazareth it was a different story. Everyone knew Jesus and his family. He was a local craftsman. He was supposed to be just like them so even when they heard him speak (v. 2) and saw him healing (v. 5), people could not shake off their preconceptions. Was he getting above his station in life? Had he, by going away, failed in his duty to his mother?

Here in the synagogue in Nazareth they were "offended," and they rejected him, crying out: "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! 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?" Now it's interesting to note, that in this context, the original Greek word for "offense" means stumbling block. What stumbling block might they have had? Well to begin with, they lived in a Roman-occupied territory. It was dangerous for everyone, especially the Jews. Their relationship with the Romans was awkward at best. So, they probably tried to keep a low profile and not do anything that would draw attention to themselves. Jesus's very association with them as a "son" of Nazareth was threatening from a political point of view. We can imagine that they were afraid that they would become tainted by his actions, that the principalities and powers would conclude that Jesus came out of a revolutionary atmosphere in Nazareth.

They tried to find ways to get rid of him, they belittled his lack of formal education; they made light of his occupation as a carpenter, and; they criticized his family as being one of little consequence. This rejection was not limited to Jesus' fellow townspeople. Even his family and his wider circle of relatives rejected him and his testimony.

There's also the theory of familiarity breeding contempt. Jesus even invited this spin with his response, "A prophet is not without honour, except in their own hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." Whatever the reason, or reasons, for their rejection of Jesus, I think we can assume that their hearts were hardened and therefore they were not open to Jesus' teaching.

How sad for them. They rejected Jesus.

...and their rejection hurt him. Mark tells us "He could do no deed of power there" and "was amazed at their unbelief." Their blatant rejection hindered his ability to do deeds of power among them; at the most, he could only "lay his hands on a few sick people and cure them."

How well this passage illustrates Jesus' humanity. Like us, he felt the pain of rejection, not only with his homecoming but increasingly through the rest of his ministry and ultimately on the cross. Through Jesus' humanity we know that "God feels our pain." And he needs us.

This reading points out how the participation of the people through the exercise of their faith was strategic to Jesus' effectiveness to transform lives; they were not simply observers, but participants in Jesus' work. And their rejection of Jesus resulted in their own rejection of what he was capable of doing for them.

How does this passage relate to our lives? Well, in several ways.

When we reject strangers — we reject Jesus.

It doesn't matter what our rejection is based on. When we reject others, we do not love them as we were commanded to...and we limit God's work in their lives and in ours.

When we reject those closest to us — we reject Jesus.

Why is it that we are hardest on those to whom we are most familiar? When we deny our loved ones love we limit their ability to love and support us. And we limit God's work through them and through us.

Mark tells us in this chapter that Jesus recognized that he was a disowned "prophet without honour," and as a result, he withdrew from the close familial and neighbourhood ties of the past and began in earnest the creation of a new community, the kingdom of God.

Never underestimate the power of God to take the most unlikely person and do something miraculous with him or her. Consider the prophets, David whom his father initially rejected to lead his people in battle, the first disciples, Paul the most unlikely of disciples and so on.

Jesus did not give up on his family and friends back home.

His brother, James, went on to lead the church in Rome. God's love extends to everyone. Despite rejection, Jesus forgave and he died on the cross for all our sins.

Let us never reject Jesus by rejecting others.