

Sermon on Mark 6:1-13
July 18

When Michele and I were dating things got serious enough that we decided to “friend” each other on Facebook. Then we found out that we had exactly one friend in common. A guy named Josh.

Josh was a junior in high school and a member of my church when I landed my first ministry job out of college. He was in my youth group. Josh hung around the kids in the youth group that came to every event, participated in every worship service, volunteered for most opportunities, and generally liked hanging around the youth building when nothing was going on. Josh wasn't the athletic one, or the cool one, or the musical one, or the nerdy one. He was a little bit of all of those but most of all, he was the clown. He was funny and goofy and a little clumsy.

One time in his senior year, I took Josh and a few of his friends to the driving range. He didn't have his own clubs, so he borrowed his dad's. Not long into our session he hits a ball and the end of his club goes flying out into the field much further than his ball traveled - such a Josh thing to happen. He was afraid to return home with his dad's driver missing the club head, so, goofy not-so-athletic Josh slipped on a motorcycle helmet and went running out into the field while dozens of balls were hurling past him every second. He made it back with the club head unscathed and the attendant came over and told us if we did that again he'd kick us out.

So when Michele and I are on a date and she asks me “So how do you know Pastor Josh Sherif?”, I say...who?! And then she goes on to describe him as the pastor of her church in Albany Park and that he was a great leader and even better preacher. All I can picture is Josh running around in the middle of the driving range with a motorcycle helmet strapped to his head searching for his dad's lost golf club.

I had a very difficult time imagining Josh as Michele was describing him because the Josh I knew stopped at high school and the Josh she knew was a mature believer and father and pastor with a passion for ministry.

The discrepancy that I'm describing to you about my friend Josh, is similar to what is going on in our text for this morning. So let's open our Bibles to Mark 6:1-13.

"Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. **2** When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? **3** Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph,^[a] Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

4 Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home." **5** He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. **6** He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Back in May of this year, Grace Kinstler, a top 3 finalist on the most recent season of American Idol, had a special homecoming in the town where she grew up. That was right here in Crystal Lake. That's right! If you were hiding under the same rock as me over the last year you might not realize that some home-grown talent made it all the way to the end of American Idol. When she came back, hundreds of people were gathered downtown CL to greet her, cheer her on, and will her to take first place.

Imagine if Grace had come home and maybe people were impressed with her being on TV and everything they insulted her, spread embarrassing rumors, and discredited her abilities. It would be embarrassing for Grace, and it would be embarrassing for Crystal Lake.

This is exactly the kind of reception Jesus gets when he returns home after beginning his ministry of teaching and healing. He was disregarded, mocked, and (I'm not really sure what this means) he was unable to perform many miracles there.

The people of Nazareth are prejudiced against Jesus. Their prejudice leads them to unbelief. Their unbelief leads to the absence of God's power.

Prejudice > unbelief > absence of power

Now when I say prejudice, I mean that in the most textbook of ways possible. Prejudice is an assumption or an opinion about someone simply based on that person's membership to a particular group. So in the case with my friend Josh, my preconceived idea of him affected my ability to accept how my wife knew him.

When Jesus blows into town, let's look at everyone's reaction:

People are amazed!
Where did he get these things?

And then they turn to whispers...

Isn't this the carpenter?
Isn't this Mary's son?
Don't we know his family? I'm pretty sure they live just down the block.

These don't sound like insults, but calling up Jesus' profession "carpenter" wasn't meant as a compliment. A carpenter today is a specific and highly specialized profession and one that carries some respect and assumed competency. "Carpenter" in Jesus' day was a more broad term that meant "builder" and really just signified manual labor. Isn't he just a manual laborer?" they might be saying. Also in regards to his wisdom, they know that Jesus had no formal training or was a rabbi's disciple - at least not with anyone of repute. So they are inferring...this uneducated, day-worker comes around saying all these things? Who does he think he is? And besides, isn't he Mary's son?

Again, another insult. To us Mary, the mother of Jesus is an elevated character in God's Kingdom. She's been captured beautifully by history's greatest artists in paintings and sculptures. Monuments and cathedrals and towers have been erected in her honor. Some faith traditions even petition her in their prayer practices.

But back home, Mary is the mother of a (likely, in their eyes) illegitimate son, Jesus. Her first pregnancy was scandalous and still when Jesus is an adult, they are putting that out there. You can tell by the way they mention Mary instead of Joseph. Simply by omitting Joseph in favor of Mary, they mean to slight Jesus and his reputation.

They are amazed at him, but in almost the same breath, they cut him down and discredit him because of his upbringing and socioeconomic status.

Prejudice leads to unbelief leads to absence of power

The text says that Jesus was amazed at their unbelief. Let's just assume that it takes quite a bit to amaze the divine-made-flesh creator of the universe, God's son, the Alpha and Omega, the only king forever, messiah, redeemer, Holy One of Israel.

He's amazed at their *lack* of faith. And as a result, he's not able to perform many miracles.

Prejudice leads to a lack of faith which leads to the absence of power.

What could it possibly mean that Jesus couldn't perform many miracles?

You might be familiar with the comic Superman. Born on the dying planet of Krypton, sent to Earth in a spaceship that crashed in Smallville, Kansas and grows up with Jonathan and Martha Kent, assuming the identity of Clark Kent. As a man, he develops super powers: He's faster than a locomotive, leaps tall buildings in a single bound, he has super strength, super breath, laser beam eyes, and of course...he can fly. Do you know, however, where Superman gets his power? He gets it from the yellow sun. What gives him his strength is Earth's sun. Back home on his planet, where the sun is red, he's just like a normal guy.

The way the text reads it sounds as though the lack of faith of his neighbors is like a red sun to Jesus. "He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them."

So I suppose one theory is that where Jesus finds people unwilling to accept God's power, God's power is appropriately absent. (we'll come back to that idea)

There's another idea and it takes into consideration the way historical events are remembered and recorded. The simplest way to describe it is this: if Jesus were performing miracles and the people had no confidence in him, then they would actively dismiss his actions.

Here's a quote from Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman Glatfelter Professor of Biblical Studies United Lutheran Seminary Gettysburg, Penn.

"Ultimately, what didn't happen in Nazareth is not much of a surprise. A miracle is not just an event but it is an interpreted event. If Jesus is not regarded to be capable of healing, any healing that does happen won't be attributed to him. So, there is nothing here to see. Move along, move along..."

Whatever theory you choose, the end result is the same. The ministry of Jesus and the momentum of God's Spirit in that community just sort of fizzles out. And then, Jesus moves on.

In the next section, which I won't read to save us a bit of time, Jesus sends out his disciples in pairs to do exactly what he's doing. Heal the sick and cast out demons and preach the Gospel, and he says

"And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them."

This was a symbolic gesture reserved typically when the Jewish people of Jesus' day would walk through a Gentile town and when they got to the edge, they'd shake off the dust as if to say "I'm done with you, and I'm not taking any of this place with me."

That's fascinating to me. That Jesus is signaling to these towns with no faith or hospitality, I'm done here. I'm moving on.

Now, wherever we look at scripture. It's important for us to observe these little nuances and to pay attention to why this picture of Jesus or this picture of God is a part of his revelation to us. We must ask ourselves...does this mean something for my life?

You might be sitting there and thinking, whew! Well I'm in the clear here. I totally believe in Jesus! I have a crucifix on my wall, my WWJD bracelet is strapped on tight, I've got K-LOVE programmed to every station on my car radio, I never miss a Sunday, and I even write in the margins of my study Bible. I, thankfully, am not prejudiced against Jesus.

But you are.

And I am too. We all are.

It's okay. It's not your fault. It's baked into the very fiber of our culture to be prejudiced against Jesus, or prejudiced against faith in God.

This is not the part where I rail against sex, drugs and rock n' roll. No, the matter is much more serious than that - much more deep seeded than our preferred forms of entertainment. What's going on in our culture is that faith in God is no longer a universal value.

I'm not particularly qualified to speak on this matter, so I'm going to refer to a book called *The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard. This is going to require you to really focus, so straighten up, stretch if you need to, and really listen in on this. Willard is describing what I'm talking about and he's borrowing the phrase, the "Flight From God":

"The idea of an all-encompassing, all-penetrating world of God, interactive at every point with our lives, where we can be totally at home and safe regardless of what happens in the visible dimension of the universe, is routinely treated as ridiculous.

It is not hard to see the concrete and oppressive form that the flight from God takes today. There is, for example, no field of expertise in human affairs where interaction with God is a part of the subject matter or practice that must be mastered in order to be judged competent. This is true of chemistry and public administration, but it is also true of education, nursing, police work, and often, astonishingly, Christian ministry itself. It is true of marriage and parenting. Just observe how people are taught and certified or judged competent in any of these fields, and you will be staring the flight from God straight in the face.

All of us live in such a world, for we live by our competencies. Our souls are, accordingly, soaked with secularity. In any context in which people are supposed to be smart and informed, even the most thoughtful and devout Christian will find it hard to make a convincing presentation of the relevance of God and his spiritual world to “real life.”

If I can tie that back to what we’re talking about: you are prejudiced against God and his kingdom because we live in a world that places no value on spiritual maturity in any arena of competency.

Remember my two theories of what it means that Jesus had little power to perform miracles? Here’s what that looks like for us.

Either our lack of faith has made it difficult for God to truly act in our culture (God tends to not hang around areas where he’s not wanted), OR God is acting and we’re ignoring it and calling out the trite concepts of fate, coincidence, luck.

We’ve spent our entire lives disregarding the spiritual realities of this world where God’s power ebbs and flows that we’ve either cut ourselves off from its source, or we’ve become blind to its impact.

Our built-in prejudice leads to unbelief which then leads to a lack of God’s power.

Do you feel that in your life lately? That it seems like God isn’t doing much or at least that you can’t sense it or see it? This isn’t a perfect formula. Sometimes despite our lack of faith God does miraculous things in our life. And sometimes when our faith is greatest, God seems strangely absent.

But we live in a culture that routinely carries on without God and then we look around and think, “how did things get like this?”

Now that feels huge - and you can't change the culture. So don't get overwhelmed by the fact that the problem is bigger than you or me. What you can do is be aware of your prejudice, and do your best to counter it.

Here's how I do that:

Remember that Jesus was a real person, flesh and blood, who really lived, preached that Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, healed the sick, cared for the poor, and was killed for his claims of being the Messiah.

Remember God's kingdom is a spiritual reality that's joined at every molecule of the physical world. Everywhere we go, every relationship we have, and every moment big and small is connected to God's world. More practically speaking, God's kingdom is in your living room, and at your office, and where you hang out with your friends - it can be accessed anywhere. This makes your whole life relevant to your faith in Jesus, not just the things you've set aside as spiritual times and places.

Lastly, remember that the world hasn't really changed that much. Nothing fundamental has changed in our knowledge of ultimate reality and humanity since the time of Jesus. So you can trust his teachings and outlook on life. You can rely on his way being the best kind of life. Jesus isn't some kind of nice but slightly out of touch moral teacher. He had cognitive and practical mastery of every phase of reality: physical, moral, and spiritual.

Some people have managed to escape this predicament and foster a real faith in Jesus. The rest of us really need your encouragement.

If you've ever struggled with a lack of faith, or unbelief, you should know that you're not alone. I'm willing to bet most Christians big and small have at times thought to themselves concerning faith... "Is any of this even real?" I believe you can overcome those thoughts. What I'm asking you to do today is recognize that you've been raised in a culture that has answered that question with a

resounding, “no.” So lack of faith is the norm, and having true faith is a wild departure from it.

Allow the person and power of Jesus to penetrate your unbelief. Literally ask God to grant you belief if that’s what you want. I think if we do that not only will we be more perceptive to God’s presence and power in our lives but we’ll be able to tap into it ourselves.