**Homily for July 7th 2024 Mark 6:1-6 “Nobody Likes Being Taken for Granted”**

*Jesus came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and 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! 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?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” 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.*

If I were a betting man, I would wager that not too many of you have traveled to my home state of New York, and of those who have been there, few would have gone to the wee northern town of Dannemora. Sounds quaint, has an Irish lilt to it, Dannemora. For the tourist, there would be no reason to go there, and several reasons not to, the primary one being that Dannemora is home to the largest maximum-security prison in the state. Not a lot of tourist itineraries to Susanville, same idea. The walls to the Dannemora facility – it houses 3,000 men – are thick concrete, over sixty feet high. It totally dominates the town, a town whose non-prison population is less than a thousand. It is also nearly in Canada, and the winters are absolutely as brutal as one would think they would be; it is known in the prison system there as “our little Siberia”. It is a rough, depressing, restrictive place to live, and living in the literal shadow of the prison has its effects.

I bring all this up because I have been friends with a few of the pastors who were appointed to the Dannemora United Methodist Church. And they experienced the same kind of oppressive resistance, the same level of being taken for granted that Jesus experienced in our bible lesson today. In that situation, where folks are skeptical, hostile, or dismissive, ministry does not flourish. You would think that a big dose of hope and love would be as welcome as the flowers of spring, which in Dannemora usually arrives by mid-June, but that’s not how it works. The whole town is imprisoned, by fear and distrust and a pervasive sadness. It is a tough place to do effective ministry.

There was no big maximum-security prison in Nazareth when Jesus returned. But neither was there a ticker-tape parade welcoming the healer home, nor a big sign outside that proudly claimed its native son. But because of the hostility of the people, his work there was impaired, because God does not force the divine hand. Everywhere else, healing flowed from Jesus like water, but water will not flow uphill, and so in that town, where he really could have used his skills to convert and convince, the skills just weren’t there. Everywhere else in his recorded ministry there was effectiveness, abundant fruit, healings and miracles and even resurrections, but not there.

I love stories from the Holy land, and even the odd tale from Dannemora, New York, but I sense that it is high time for some local color. Stories from around town, stories about people like us. I think people like us can take two primary learnings from a text like this. The first is the role of the *community* in either encouraging or inhibiting our faith and practice. Living where we do, we feel this effect every day. Not exactly hostility, right, but certainly we experience an atmosphere of dismissiveness and sometimes derision. Our work, in the main, is taken for granted. Being a Christian in Chico is like being a vegetarian in Texas; nothing *wrong* with it, but folks just aren’t quite sure what to do with us. And strive as we may to rise above that, to love people however they feel about us, the ‘whatever’ quality makes it harder, doesn’t it?

Folks around us also contribute to the success or failure of our creating goodness in the world in the name of Christ. I am quite aware of the *interdependent* nature of all of this on this occasion of celebrating Independence Day. Because even Jesus, for all of his gifts, could not make people loving and forgiving where they were devoted to being hateful and vengeful. Even Jesus requires of us and others an *interdependence,* a level of *co*-operation. How does the famous poem go? *“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.* “

So, the first learning is a rightful acceptance of our community and its ability to either promote or demote the value of our work together. The second learning is that we need to take seriously the human reality of being either too *dismissive* or too *effusive* with home-grown folks. Either overstep can be trouble, because when it comes to home-grown folks, one can go from hero to heretic, and back, pretty quickly; and that big knife really does cut both ways; people can easily embrace outside experts and poo-poo local visionaries, or just the opposite, locking out all growth and progress if it isn’t from right here around these here parts.

Anyone who has ever been in a loving relationship for more than ten minutes can demonstrate the first side of this truth, that of being too dismissive of local expertise. Say, ladies, that there is something about your beloved that you really think could be improved for the better. Just hypothetically. And so you mention it, lovingly of course, you would never nag, but it doesn’t change, so you mention it with increasing frequency, but you may as well be talking to the dishwasher. And then, some friend, or God forbid, some pretty *stranger* suggests the same thing to your sweetie, and, well, they think it is a Nobel-prize winning idea, and they make the change. Infuriating, isn’t it? But very, very human, to ignore the local expert and favor the outside authority. I also see this happening at the spiritual level with increasing clarity. We here are Christians, right, and the teachings of Jesus are the guide of our life. But oh, those Buddhist ideas sure make some sense. Or the latest from Deepak Chopra, or Oprah Winfrey. We can get all energized, turn ourselves inside out over a new idea that isn’t new at all, not because we are mentally deficient but because we are *human,* and sometimes prone to favor the new, shiny, not-from-here over the stuff we have been living with for decades.

And what about the other side of that blade? What about the equally human folly of excluding all thought, produce, and input that comes from anywhere *but* right here? If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it, we say. It was good enough for my grandma, it’s good enough for me, we say. And we apply the same rules of use and mending that we might ascribe to socks to every aspect of our lives, from homes and cars to spiritual pursuits. On this side of the knife nothing will ever change, and living like that is just about as effective as getting water to flow uphill. You can do it, with pressure and artificial systems, but it isn’t natural. Many of us believe that God is continually evolving, friends, and that the children of God must follow that lead. A lot of hymns have enshrined that aspect of God’s personality, what we call the immutability of God, the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Many of these are great songs but they no longer reflect the living understanding of our living God among living Christian folks! So why would we be content to remain that way, or worse, make it our life’s purpose to stay that way, static and unchanging, sloth hidden inside a dubious virtue?

My final illustration this morning is a really home-grown one; it has to do with the music we have been having here at Trinity since Kathy’s retirement back in 2021. We have engaged a few other organists and pianists and choir directors; additionally it has been my joy to provide some of our music, but I am not an organist and am self-taught at the piano. And so we have had a fair amount of accordion and some ukulele, even foot-drums a time or two. None of these could ever be mistaken for traditional worship instruments! It would have been easier, surely, to have just played recordings. Kathy left us hundreds of good ones, and the denomination has the whole hymnal available, even though the official ones are pretty mediocre and hard to sing with. But *safe!* You have known me now going on fifteen years; we have the longest togetherness of any church in our district. And so, by now, you know that this has unfolded the way it has because I do not serve the God of sameness, safeness, or stuffiness, and neither should we, I say.

Here’s the bottom line, as true kneeling alone by your bed as it is on the floor of a National Political convention: we who would be spiritual have to learn to manage our human nature, and not have it manage us. We have to learn how the attitudes around us can either free or shackle our effectiveness in the world. And we have to learn that those group dynamics usually play big individually, and that we are all prone to basing our lives on either new-at-all-costs or nothing new, no way, no how! At the end of the day, all of us are students in this life, and even though it’s summer break, we don’t have the luxury of lazing about and learning nothing. This story about Jesus being taken for granted is really about us, individually and as a church. In this life of ours, we can create the environment where the Spirit flows, or we can create Dannemora…Amen.