

**United Church of Fayetteville**  
**310 E. Genesee Street**  
**Fayetteville, NY 13066**  
**July 5, 2009**  
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**THE LIMITS OF POWER (Mark 6:1-6)**

Scripture is a tricky thing. You can read a passage over and over again. You can have heard it read many times over the years. You read excerpts or hear it quoted or misquoted – and you think you know it. Then one day, something jumps out at you – it was always there, but somehow it never made itself known before. I had such an experience this week with our gospel lesson. Of course, like the rest of you, I could quote Jesus, almost without reading, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” Actually, Mark is the only gospel writer who elaborates – “It’s not just the townspeople. Why even his relatives, even his own mother and brothers, are saying “Prophet! My eye!” “I changed his diapers.” “I taught him how to drive a nail straight.” “We knew Jesus when...”

The story suggests, not that familiarity breeds contempt; rather that it gives birth to doubt, surprise, blindness to reality, and an underestimation of talent and possibility. (And, at least, in Matthew’s version, there is also anger at the “presumption” of someone just like them, claiming another role in the reign of God.) The essential truth of this story gave birth not just to thousands of sermons and the interpretation of our personal experiences of rejection, but to an entire industry – that of consultants and interims in every field. It’s easier to hear the truth from an outsider, who we are generally willing to concede may see things we don’t. It’s easier on the consultant too – a consultant gets to leave town, – unlike the hometown “expert.” There is additional cost in rejection to the hometown prophet – disappointment, anger, hurt feelings, frustration, potentially damaged relationships.

That’s all true and preach-able, -- and maybe I will preach it some day:-) -- but it’s not what struck me this week. It was the ending of the passage. Listen for it: “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 [Jesus] was amazed at their unbelief.’”** [*emphasis mine*] “And he **could** do no deed of power there...And he was amazed at their unbelief.”

“... he **could** do no deed of power there...” Well, that’s not entirely true. Mark cedes that Jesus did a few healings, but because of the local congregation’s lack of belief, there were limits. That’s startling – after all Jesus stilled storms and healed people he never even met, people who weren’t believers as well as ones who were -- so it’s a little uncomfortable to think that Jesus’ power was limited by humans. Yet, according to Mark (and all the gospel writers, although none of the others are quite so direct), there was only so much Jesus could do – a few healings, but apparently not nearly what **Jesus** felt was possible if only the congregation believed.

Of course, we have the benefit of hindsight, the rest of Jesus’ ministry, how well he did when he shook the dust of a narrow-minded small town off his feet and moved on to the wider world. We know what Jesus can do and we believe, so this doesn’t really apply to us.

Except that it does, because Jesus is our home town prophet now. This space is his home town, this house of worship where his words are heard week after week. Why, we even call ourselves brothers and sisters in Christ – his kin. So, it’s entirely possible, that like those in our gospel story, it might be hard for us to see him in a new role, a new place. Now we have the familiarity with him those earlier believers did. After all, we knew Jesus when...

We knew Jesus when all our neighbors belonged to the church. We knew Jesus when church was the only place for education and social life after graduation. We knew Jesus when a confirmation class had 40-50 youth in it. We knew Jesus when everyone's family was a husband and a wife and 1.8 children, even the pastor's. We knew Jesus when the world was a safe and predictable place. We knew Jesus when there was always enough money even when there wasn't. We knew Jesus when church was crowded, and no one stayed home unless they were sick. We knew Jesus when no one was afraid to talk about what they believed or invite new neighbors to come with them. We knew Jesus when newspapers wrote church stories about good things, not closings and misconduct. We knew Jesus when there were enough volunteers and it didn't take weeks to schedule a meeting, when there was no crew practice on Sunday morning and businesses weren't open. We knew Jesus when it was okay to say "Merry Christmas" and not worry about offending someone. It doesn't matter how accurate that description of the world was, we knew Jesus when it felt like it was all true. Oh, we knew Jesus when...

And now here he is standing here among us today, preaching and teaching and telling us he can heal the world and us along with it – this world where people work and travel and have diverse beliefs and stay home or work or play instead of coming to worship, perhaps because there is no other time; this world where people live and die without ever having a faith of their own; this Church in the world where we fight among ourselves about music and worship, politics and vision, who's in and who's out and how to divide up the funds we do have; this Church in the world where there is always more ministry and mission to be done than volunteers to do it and "people just aren't committed like they used to be." And Jesus is standing here saying, "I still have the power to work with this world and in you. I am still here, still transforming the world one person, one place at a time."

And we look at him and wonder and say, "We knew Jesus when..." We wonder if he is still enough, if he has the power to tame the terrors of our world, reconcile our wounded relationships, soothe frightened souls and give us energy and hope. We knew Jesus when and we are wondering if he is the one for this time and place.

As we wonder, it might do us well to remember other occasions when Jesus appeared in new and frightening situations: We knew Jesus when the world was at war across the globe, and when our nation has been at war in many places since then. We knew Jesus when people of every view worked for what they saw as justice, We knew Jesus when men and women came home, changed forever, and when they were buried in some distant patch of earth; We knew Jesus when disease or divorce rocked our world; when death took a loved one; when jobs were lost and children left home. We knew Jesus when we found out not everyone had the freedoms we do, so freedom riders registered voters and marched and prayed across the land until things changed; We knew Jesus when people of promise died from an assassin's bullet and we knew Jesus when their work went on. We knew Jesus when people who had the public trust did extraordinary things beyond imagining or violated it to all our disappointment. We knew Jesus when he stepped into all those rooms, lives, times and situations and spoke a word of hope, offered a healing hand or waited with us until the dawn. In those moments, we wondered at his power, and in these moments we know he had it ... We knew Jesus when...

Jesus stands in front of us now, in these days, when our congregation looks at a new way of doing church in a world we don't think we know any more. We faces challenges that seem to change by the minute. We need not only to respond to change, but to anticipate the future and to lead the way to new life in Christ. Jesus stands in front of us now and says "I have the power – but there are limits of my power. I have so much more ability to work in you if you believe than if you don't."

In these moments, when we wonder, when we hesitate while Jesus holds out a hand of invitation, and hand of healing a hand of hope, let us remember that we knew Jesus when ...

We knew Jesus when we felt safe and hopeful. We also knew Jesus when he acted outside of our expectations and transformed our lives beyond our imagining. It is both the Jesus of our remembering and the transforming Christ of a new day – who stands in front

of us now, who has prepared this Table for us and bids us come and dine with him -- who has the power to heal our every ill, inform our choices and empower our ministry for this day and for the days to come – and who has oh so much more power, if we dare to believe.