Lesson Seven

Hometown People: Stuck in the Ordinary

Focal Text
Mark 6:1-6

Background
Mark 6:1-6

Main Idea
People from Jesus’ hometown failed to express faith in Jesus and receive his blessings because they were unwilling to see him for who he truly was.

Question to Explore
In what ways are you stuck in the ordinary when faith is challenging you to go further?

Quick Read
Familiarity with Jesus can keep us from experiencing all he wants to do in and through our lives.

Commentary
One of the most powerful parables I’ve heard is called the old men who know. A village was established in a beautiful valley, where grass and game were plentiful and water was abundant. The town grew and prospered. Over time, a group of young pioneers climbed the nearby mountains and brought back an excited report to the village: On the other side there was even more plentiful grass, game, and water. The people should move there, for they would thrive even more fully.
However, there was in the village a council called *the old men who know*. They said, *There can’t be anything like that. We’ve been here all our lives, and this is where we’ll stay.* So they stayed, until the years passed and the town outgrew its resources and the people began to die. In desperation, a few hardy souls followed the young pioneers over the nearby mountains, where they found just what they’d been promised—an even broader valley, with even greater resources. So they settled, and grew and prospered.

Years later, a new generation of young pioneers climbed the next mountains, and brought back a report that the valley beyond was even broader with greater resources for the village. But the original pioneers had become *the old men who know*.

It is vital that people hear the gospel (Romans 10:14-15) so they can believe its truth and love God with all their hearts, souls, and minds (Matthew 22:37). But it is also vital that those who believe the gospel remain in love with their Lord. If our relationship with Jesus grows familiar and complacent, we will miss much of what he wants to do with and through our lives.

Are you in danger of such complacency? If your immediate answer is “no,” you may be in the greatest danger of all.

**Travel to Nazareth**

Our text is situated in Nazareth, Jesus’ hometown. Nazareth today is the largest city in the Northern District of Israel and is known as *the Arab capital of Israel*. Its thriving economy and technological resources have made it *the Silicon Valley of the Arab community* as well. The city’s population, exceeding 200,000, is composed primarily of Arab citizens of Israel, almost all of whom are Muslim or Christian. In fact, it is home to one of the largest Christian populations in the country and a thriving evangelical seminary.

*In Jesus’ day*

None of this was true in Jesus’ day. We are not sure when and how the town was founded. Some trace its origins to 100 B.C. and a clan from the line of David. We cannot be certain, though, for the town is not mentioned even once in the Old Testament, by Josephus, or in any of the rabbinic literature of the day. The town is located on the Nazareth Ridge, 1,300 feet above sea level. It is 16 miles west of the Sea of Galilee and 25 miles southwest of Capernaum.

In the time of Jesus, Nazareth was a tiny agricultural village. Estimates as to its population range from 150 down to 15 or 20 inhabitants. Recent excavations have
revealed a town not much larger than the 10 Jewish men (and their families) required for a synagogue to be established.

The etymology of its name is debated. (It should not be confused with the Nazirites, those who practiced especially ascetic lives; see Numbers 6:1-21.) Some trace Nazareth to the Hebrew na-sar, which means watch, guard, suggesting that the town’s location atop a ridge made it a watchtower for the area. Others identify it with the Hebrew ne-ser, or branch, connecting the word to the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 11:1: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”

The latter identification is more likely, in light of Matthew’s statement that Jesus and his family “went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene’” (Matthew 2:23). Since there is no Old Testament prophecy containing these words, many scholars connect the statement to Isaiah 11:1 and identify “branch” as the meaning of Nazareth.

Jesus’ childhood in Nazareth was not as isolated as the size of his hometown might suggest. The road below their hillside connected Tyre and Sidon with Jerusalem, and Nazareth was populated by Roman soldiers, Greek merchants, and travelers from around the world.

Just four miles northwest stood the great city of Sepphoris, the capital of the Galilee province and one of the most significant cities of their era. Excavations have revealed a massive, cosmopolitan city of great wealth. When I lead study tours to Israel, we always visit this remarkable town. Many scholars believe that Joseph and Jesus worked as carpenters here, helping to build the houses and other structures of the city. Here Jesus could have seen Greek plays (the impressive theater still stands), learned the Greek language, and interacted with some of the most advanced culture of his day.

It is likely that his father died when Jesus was an adolescent or young man, for there is no mention of him in the Scriptures past Jesus’ twelfth birthday (Luke 2:48). As the oldest son of the family, he would have assumed responsibility for their wellbeing. He continued his father’s trade as a carpenter (tekton, meaning one who works with his hands). Justin Martyr, a second-century Christian theologian and apologist, states that Jesus built plows, yokes, and other implements. Given the scarcity of wood in this region, it is likely that Jesus worked as a stonemason as well.

**Rejecting Jesus**

Then came the great day when Jesus left his home to begin his public ministry. After his baptism by John, he began gathering disciples (John 1:35-51). When Philip became his follower, he turned to Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of
Joseph” (John 1:45). Nathanael immediately responded, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46). His caustic statement may have quoted a popular parable of the day, and likely reflected the tiny size and insignificant stature of the town.

Upon returning to Galilee, Jesus returned to Nazareth and went to the synagogue where he had worshiped his Father since he was a child. The scroll of the Book of Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled it and read:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Jesus then astonished his hometown audience by stating, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18-19, 21, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2). Tragically, his hometown rejected his ministry and even tried to kill him by throwing him down the “cliff” where the town was situated (Luke 4:29).

By contrast, when Jesus went to Capernaum, “they were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority” (Luke 4:31). Jesus made Capernaum his ministry headquarters, living here until his death and resurrection. He would return to Nazareth just once more, as we will see in this lesson.

From then to now
After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the town kept alive a tradition regarding a spring where Mary was said to have obtained water which was reported to possess healing powers. They also identified the house where the Annunciation was thought to have occurred. In the fourth century, Constantine designated Nazareth as a center for Christian pilgrims; a Byzantine church was built at the Annunciation site.

In the seventeenth century, the Franciscans came to Nazareth. Their work in the area transformed the village into the largest Christian center in Israel. In 1996, the Roman Catholic Church began constructing what is today one of the largest church buildings in Israel, at the site believed to be Mary’s home. A Greek Orthodox church stands at the site where the original synagogue of Jesus’ day is thought to have stood. Saint Gabriel’s Church is set at an alternative site for the Annunciation. The Church of Saint Joseph’s Carpentry commemorates the traditional site of Joseph’s carpenter’s shop. The Mensa Christi Church, maintained by the Franciscans, commemorates the location where Jesus is said to have eaten with the Apostles after his resurrection.
It is difficult for Holy Land pilgrims today to see in the modern, thriving city of Nazareth a tiny town of just a few families. Their rejection of Jesus is part of Scripture as a warning to us, lest we follow their example today.

Refuse the lure of the familiar (6:1-3)
The saying, “familiarity breeds contempt,” dates from ancient times. Nowhere in literature is this observation more tragically proven than in this week’s study.

Amazed by Jesus
In the days leading to our text, Jesus’ miraculous powers generated a remarkable following in Galilee. Crowds “followed and pressed around him” (Mark 5:24). One was “so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge” (4:1). His power over the stormy sea “terrified” his disciples (4:41); his ability to heal a demoniac created a missionary to the Decapolis (5:20); his healing of Jairus’s deceased daughter left her family and his inner circle “completely astonished” (5:42).

We might assume that Jesus’ remarkable popularity would be even greater in his hometown. But we would be wrong. Our text begins: “Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples” (6:1). He “left” (exelthen, meaning departed, retired from) the area where he had been ministering, presumably Capernaum, and “went” (erchetai, or came over to) his “hometown” (patrida, or fatherland), “accompanied” (akolouthousin, or coming after) by his disciples. He took them with him, for he was preparing them for their own mission to begin shortly (6:7-13). Jesus’ identification with his hometown is clear in Mark’s Gospel: in 1:24, 10:47, and 16:6 he is called “Jesus of Nazareth”; in 14:67, he is referred to as “the Nazarene.”

Our text continues: “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, that he even does miracles!’” (6:2). Synagogues did not typically have resident rabbis. As we saw in lesson six (see 5:22), the “synagogue ruler” was responsible for the operations of the institution, including the task of finding a rabbi to teach each week. Since rabbis frequently traveled the land with their students, one was often available.

Jesus’ popularity was such that he was invited on this Sabbath to “teach” (didaskein, meaning instruct, tell the people) on this occasion. Imagine a famous evangelist or missionary visiting your church, invited by your pastor to speak to the congregation. However, Jesus might have been interrupted by the crowd, as “began to teach” could indicate. Many of those who heard him were “amazed” (exeplessonto, or overwhelmed,
greatly astounded). They were shocked by Jesus’ “wisdom” (sophia, or insight) and his “miracles” (dynamis, or power, strength, might). Descriptions of these mighty works would have spread around the region (1:28, 45; 3:7-8; 5:20-21).

Familiar with Jesus
Mark gives us their reaction: “Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him” (6:3). Jesus was “the carpenter” (tekton, or builder; the word appears as the latter half of the word architect) and son of a carpenter (Matt. 13:55), known to them by his blue-collar trade.

They also called Jesus “Mary’s son” (the only time he is given this descriptor in the Bible). This title has provoked much scholarly discussion, since it was most unusual in their culture. A man was almost always known by his father (see “Simon son of Jonah,” Matt. 16:17). Earlier the same people called Jesus “Joseph’s son” (Luke 4:22). Why the change here?

Some see this phrase as a reference to questions regarding Jesus’ virgin birth and adoption by Joseph. If so, their unbelief in Jesus would indicate that they saw his birth as illegitimate rather than miraculous. (Later Jewish polemic would charge that he was born out of wedlock, claiming that his mother had been seduced by a Gentile named Pandera.)

Why, then, did they earlier call him “Joseph’s son”? At that time the people of Nazareth were impressed by Jesus’ ministry. Perhaps their subsequent rejection led them to such a scandalous charge against him when he returned home. While such suggestions are conjectural at best, the phrase does seem to carry a negative connotation.

Jesus’ brothers were “James, Joseph, Judas and Simon,” the biological sons of Mary and Joseph. (Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions affirm the perpetual virginity of Mary and view these men as Jesus’ cousins or Joseph’s sons from a previous marriage.) To this point the brothers had rejected Jesus’ ministry. On one occasion “they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind’” (Mark 3:21). At that time, Jesus contrasted their unbelief with the faith of his disciples: “He looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother’” (3:34-35). On another occasion, Jesus’ brothers encouraged him to attend the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem even though “the Jews there were waiting to take his life” (John 7:1). John explained: “even his own brothers did not believe in him” (John 7:5).

However, following the resurrection “James” became the leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 1:19; 2:9, 12) after his encounter with the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:7). “Judas” wrote the Epistle of Jude. The other two may have
been included in the early Christian movement: after Jesus’ ascension his disciples “all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1:14). Paul could ask the Corinthians, “Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas” (1 Corinthians 9:5). (However, these “brothers” may have included only James and Judas.)

Jesus’ sisters are not named, which, according to Jewish custom, means that they were married by this time. There were “here with us,” having married men in Nazareth and stayed in the town. The fact that the brothers were not so identified probably indicates that they, like Jesus, had already moved away from the small village, perhaps to seek work. If they adopted Joseph’s trade, as did Jesus, they would not all have found work in such a tiny village.

**Offended by Jesus**

On this occasion, the townspeople “took offense” (eskandalizonto, or were angered, were shocked, were caused to reject) at him. The word appears eight times in Mark (4:17; 6:3; 9:42, 43, 45, 47; 14:27, 29); each time it indicates an obstruction that prevents people from following Jesus by faith (see Romans 9:33; 1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11).

The townspeople were deeply offended by this fellow Nazarene who had build such a large ministry with no credentials. He had not attended rabbinc schools and had no official licensure by which to conduct his ministry. Imagine a construction worker in your community who attended no seminary but suddenly became a well-known preacher and miraculous faith healer. Would the religiously sophisticated among your church react in the same way?

Remembering that every verse in Scripture is preserved because of its abiding truth, what does this story say about human nature and our faith today? While you and your class would certainly not join the Nazarenes in rejecting Jesus’ divinity and ministry, are there other ways that familiarity with him has lessened his authority and significance in your life? Does the ease with which we are allowed access to God through prayer make this great privilege more routine? Does our astounding opportunity to worship the God of the universe become less joyous over time? Are we tempted to treat with presumption Jesus’ gracious willingness to forgive our sins? Do we take for granted our access to Scripture in our own language, a gift for which many have died over the centuries to produce?

The church at Laodicea was warned by Christ that because they were “lukewarm—neither hot nor cold,” their Lord was “about to spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:16). Can familiarity with our risen Lord and King produce the same complacency in our lives and churches today?
**Receive the power of God by faith (6:4-6)**

Imagine the pain in Jesus’ heart as he responded to their rejection of their Messiah and Savior: “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor” (Mark 6:6). Jesus made a similar observation when the people of Nazareth rejected him earlier (Luke 4:24). Many had already come to view Jesus as a “prophet” (Mark 6:14-15; 8:28). Note the narrowing order: his “hometown” (patridi, or fatherland), his “relatives” (syngeneusin, or those related to him, countrymen), and his “own house” (oikia, meaning property, home).

As a result, “He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them” (6:5). “He could not do” (ouk edynato, or he was not empowered to do) any “miracles” (dynamin, or works of power and strength) in Nazareth, except lay his hands on a “few” (oligos, or slight, small number) sick people and “heal” (etherapeusen, or serve, restore) them. We would be astonished at such miraculous ministry today, but Jesus had been healing multitudes in the region.

Mark does not mean that our unbelief makes God less powerful. Rather, it exempts us from what God can do in our lives. Our Father respects the freedom he gives us and will not force on us what we refuse to receive. Faith to receive what God intends to give is a consistent theme in Mark’s Gospel (2:5; 4:40; 5:34, 36; 9:23-24; 10:52; 11:22-24).

Not only did their faith keep them from experiencing Jesus’ power, but also it even astonished our Lord: “And he was amazed at their lack of faith” (6:6). He was “amazed” (ethaumazen, or shocked) at their “lack of faith” (apistian, meaning unbelief, refusal to trust). The people of the Decapolis were “amazed” at the demoniac’s healing (5:20); Jesus’ enemies were “amazed” by his wisdom (12:17); Pilate was “amazed” at his silence when on trial for his life (15:5). But only here and with the great faith of the centurion (Matt. 8:10; Luke 7:9) does the New Testament describe Jesus as “amazed.”

This “lack of faith” is the greatest problem humans face. When lost people will not receive grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), they cannot receive salvation. When Christians will not receive God’s gifts through faith, we lose so much of the abundant life Jesus wants us to experience (John 10:10).

Jesus would never visit Nazareth again. From then to now, the townspeople’s rejection of their Lord stands as a warning to all who would do the same.

**Conclusion**

Are we like the Nazarenes? Is your church experiencing all that God wants to do in and through your lives? Remembering that God wants all people to come to repentance (2
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Peter 3:9), are you seeing as many in your community come to Christ as you should? Remembering that God wants us to be “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2), are you seeing transformed lives in your class and congregation? Remembering that Jesus called us to “ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matt. 9:38), are as many in your church going to the mission field as God would call?

If we do not experience God’s omnipotence in our lives and work, we should ask ourselves whether our faith is limiting our ability to receive what our Father wants to give. Familiarity not only breeds contempt, but it also fosters complacency. In the spiritual realm, the latter is as dangerous as the former.

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