



## COMING HOME

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Mark 6:1-13

16th Message

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June is the wonderful month of homecoming. In our house, it's the time for one of our daughters to come home from her first year at college. She is excited to be back again, returning to all that's familiar. At the top of her list is her mother's cooking, having her own room, and getting her laundry washed. Then there are reunions with her high school friends, those female friendships that never die. Such is the excitement of homecoming.

But homecoming can be a time of apprehension, too. Returnees wonder if the new things they have tasted, the new people they are becoming, will be recognized and appreciated. Will they be free to express themselves, or will they be forced back into old molds? Homecoming can be especially traumatic for one who has become a Christian in a new environment and must return to a home saturated with unbelief or agnosticism; or to a religious home, where relationships are well defined in a rigid structure. How will their new life be received? Even in the best of homes, homecoming can be bit stifling.

Discipleship involves breaking away from our family of origin to become part of a new, larger family in which we find our true identity in Christ. In our study in the gospel of Mark today, we will learn that part of that growing up process involves an occasional "coming home" to face some painful but necessary realities, as Jesus returns home to Nazareth for the first time since his baptism, which marked the beginning of his public ministry. Considering who he was, where he had been and what he had done, we can only imagine how he must have felt. The events of recent days had placed him on the east side of the sea of Galilee, reenacting Israel's exodus, stilling the sea by the power of his word, and conquering a legion of demons by casting them into the sea, as Moses had done with Pharaoh and his chariots.

Then, returning to the west side of the lake, Jesus pushed the theological limits even further in the healing of the hemorrhaging woman and the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead. In these actions, Jesus appears as the one "who heals Israel of her uncleanness and, by restoring the child to life, signals the inauguration of the promises of Yahweh's new creational restoration of Israel."<sup>1</sup> Wherever he goes or whatever stage he appears on, viewers are filled with awe and wonder. Now he must step off that large public stage and return to the home where he grew up as a boy, in the obscurity of a neighborhood, and in the simplicity of a job. How would the town of Nazareth receive its native son?

### I. The First Reception: Jesus Comes Home (6:1-6a)

#### A. Nazareth takes offense at its native son (6:1-3)

**And He went out from there, and He came into His home town; and His disciples followed Him. And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "Where did this [guy] get these things, and what is this wisdom given to [this guy], and such miracles as these performed by His hands? Is not this [guy] the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him. (NASB)**

Setting out from Jairus' home, Jesus comes into his home-town of Nazareth. Mark is careful to note that he has his disciples in tow, demonstrating that what follows is very important in their education (and ours too, as to what it means to be a disciple). As was his custom, he enters the synagogue on the Sabbath and begins to teach. Mark does not record the content of his teaching, but Luke indicates how controversial it was (Luke 4:16-30). The writer's sole interest is in the reaction that Jesus provoked. He says that as they listened to Jesus' teaching for the first time, most of the people from his home town "were being knocked out"<sup>2</sup> by what he said. We could interpret this graphic metaphor as "offended astonishment." Their response provoked a series of four questions revolving around the tension of what they had just seen and heard, with what they knew about Jesus' background.

The first question is a terse three phrases, with no verbs. Literally, they ask, "From whence this one these things?" How shockingly impersonal! They won't even bring themselves to pronounce his name, lest their lips become unclean. Their ears hear his wisdom, but in their frustration they can't identify its source, since Jesus never had any authorized rabbinical training. Their eyes witness the miracles (v. 5), but their minds can't perceive the source of power that works through his hands.

Forced to further ponder the paradox, they focus on his occupation and family background, the lens through which they had viewed him for some thirty years. "Is not this guy the carpenter?" they ask. Palestinian Jews did not despise manual labor, but in this case they defined Jesus by his occupation, much as our modern world does with people today. In this regard, how could this local carpenter suddenly break in as a prophet? Then they ask, "Is this not the son of Mary?" Some scholars (Taylor) believe it was "contrary to Jewish custom to describe a man as the son of his mother, even when the father was no longer living, except in insulting terms...it seems quite likely that rumors to the effect that Jesus was illegitimate did circulate."<sup>3</sup> Though we can't be sure whether the term "son of

Mary" insinuates illegitimacy, it does seem likely that it was derogatory to some degree. And we must not forget how important legitimate birth rights were in Israel. Any hint of illegitimacy would cause great pain to a Jew.

Then they bring up the issue of his brothers and sisters. Is not this guy "the brother of James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" As they wrestled with the astonishment of what they had just seen and heard about Jesus, and place it under the defining lens of his occupation and family background, their astonishment quickly evaporates and is replaced with contempt—a contempt that "scandalized" them. The term literally means "a trap." Whenever we view Jesus' life through the lens of the flesh (in this case his family of origin), we become caught in the trap of unbelief and are unable to see the kingdom of God.

Gundry points out the real irony of their questions:

For Mark, identifying Jesus as the carpenter misses his identity as the one stronger than John the Baptizer (1:7). Identifying him as Mary's son misses his identity as God's Son (1:1, 11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:6; 13:32; 14:61-62; 15:39). Identifying him as the brother of James, Joses, Jude, and Simon misses his identity as the one whom another Simeon (plus his brother Andrew) and another James (plus his brother John) dropped everything to follow (1:16-20). And saying that his sisters are there misses his having just recently healed the woman with the flow of blood and raised Jairus' daughter.<sup>4</sup>

So the lens of family origin has blinded his family to everything Jesus was and to the new creation he was bringing about. This would be like going home after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize and finding your family relating to you still as an adolescent, recognizing nothing of what you had accomplished or who you had influenced, for the lens with which they viewed you was as one-dimensional as it was accurate. What disappointment! Have you ever felt that? Everyone in my wife's family passed away without understanding and fully appreciating who she is in Christ. Life experiences like these leave us with a nagging ache. But our text reminds us that such experiences are necessary for discipleship in Christ.

Jesus does not leave their questions unanswered. Skillfully he cuts through the sham of their contempt, exposing the real nature of their unbelief.

### **B. Jesus reacts to rejection (6:4-6a)**

**And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his home town and among his own relatives and in his own household." (6:4)**

Jesus answers quite firmly that he is a prophet in Israel. What made prophets such was not their education, family background or human achievement; rather, it was the divine calling of God and the endowment of the Spirit. As was the case with all of Israel's prophets, familiarity bred contempt, blindness and dishonor. The original reads slightly stronger than our English translations: "A prophet is not dishonored (or shamed, disgraced) except in his home town."

Notice that the careful wording in Jesus' answer, "home

town, relatives and his own household," moves from the wide circle of community relationships, those of one's home town, to the most intimate, those of one's own family. Each phrase intensifies the intimacy and, with it, the pain of rejection. But even more than this, behind these words the sensitive listener would hear the resounding echo of the ancient call of Israel's first prophet. In that epoch-making call, God said to Abraham, in Genesis 12:1-2a,

**"Go forth from your country,  
And from your relatives  
And from your father's house,  
To the land which I will show you;  
And I will make you a great nation."**

These verses are the very heart of Old Testament theology. When Abraham, the father of Israel, was called to inherit a new land and to become the people of God, he had to *separate* from his country, his relatives and family. Is Jesus implying that he himself is the new prophet, set out on a mission as large as Abraham's: to inherit a new land larger than Israel (Matt 5:5; Rom 4:13), and to create a new people of God that would transcend national Israel (Eph 2:11-17)? If he is, the painful irony here is that neither his hometown nor his family, who claimed to be followers of Abraham, can see it. In light of the claim of Jesus, his rejection by his family and relatives declares them, in essence, to be gentiles!

**And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And He wondered at their unbelief. (6:5-6a)**

Because of their unbelief, Mark records that Jesus was not able to do any miracle there, with the exception of laying his hands on a few sick people and healing them. For Jesus to do miracles in the face of unbelief would only further harden the hearts of the community against any future possibility of repentance.

Have members of your family turned a deaf ear to the wondrous news and events of the new creation in and around your life, and have you found yourself strangely locked up in silent sorrow as a result? The text tells us how Jesus felt: "He *wondered* at their unbelief." The word means to be "caught up in wonder, to marvel, be astonished, be amazed, surprised." Normally it is used of people's reaction to the teaching and miracles of Christ, but twice in the gospels, Jesus is the subject of this verb. It is used here, that he *marveled* at their unbelief, and again in Matthew 8:10. Upon hearing of the gentile centurion's faith, Jesus marveled and said, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel."

Does it surprise you that Jesus was amazed by his family's lack of faith? His study of Israel's past and of the prophecies about him had prepared him for their initial rejection, so that at least in his mind he knew what was coming. Jesus was well versed with Jeremiah, Israel's greatest prophet, from the town of Anathoth. After the prophet was anointed by the Spirit, he returned home and delivered some of his early prophetic oracles there, only to have the townspeople respond by conceiving a plot to take his life. But knowing in the mind and experiencing in the

heart are two different things. Jesus was astonished that after his teaching and miracles had moved a hometown audience to amazement, he watched every trace of that wonder and awe dry up because of their inability to break away from family familiarity. Thus, "He marveled at their unbelief." Perhaps there have been times when you saw the work of God in a family member and have been deeply moved, perhaps even to tears. But, what happened afterwards? Did you allow the familiarity of the flesh to destroy the transcendence of that moment? If you did, know that it evoked a deep response in heaven: Jesus *marvels* at your unbelief.

In the next scene, we see what Jesus did in the face of this rejection.

## II. The Second Reception: Sending out the 12 to all Israel (6:6b-13)

**And He was going around the villages teaching.**

**And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out [two by two]; and He was giving them authority over the unclean spirits; and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belt; but to wear sandals; and He added, "Do not put on two tunics." And He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town. And any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake off the dust from the soles of your feet for a testimony against them." And they went out and preached that men should repent. And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.**

Notice three things in this text. The first is that the kingdom is not thwarted by rejection. In fact, to our surprise, the rejection at Nazareth enhances and multiplies by twelve the new creation and the work and mission of Jesus. Here is Jesus, summoning to himself the twelve, then commissioning, delegating, and entrusting his work and mission to them—and they are fully empowered by and with his authority. Just as he had taught with authority regarding the arrival of the kingdom of God, so they will now preach. Just as he had cast out demons as a sign that he had overcome the strong man, and was now plundering his goods, so they too will cast out demons. And just as he had healed the sick as a sign of the inauguration of the new age of the new creation, so now they would heal the sick by anointing them with oil. Jesus was rejected at home, but as a consequence, a miniature Israel, complete with twelve tribes, is reborn in Galilee. I have found the same to be true in my own life. Rejection enhances the life of the new creation.

The second thing to notice is that Jesus sent them out solely by faith. They were to take precious little for their journey: no money, no food, no credit cards. They were to be totally dependent on Israel's hospitality for their provisions. That is why he allowed but one tunic—so they would not be tempted to use a second as a covering, like a sleeping bag, to sleep in the open. They were forced to make contact, build relationships and penetrate the homes

of Israel. This is a great rule for evangelistic missions. Ministering in a foreign country, a Third World country at that, and depending on the hospitality of the locals for your provision does wonders for your faith. It makes staying in hotels seem boring by comparison.

Thirdly, Jesus prepares them for the same dual reception he had received. Some homes, like the home of Jairus, would welcome them with open arms, and in that case they were to remain there until they left town. Other homes would receive them in the manner that Jesus' family received him in Nazareth. Their background would be called into question, their training come under scrutiny and their message be refused. In the face of that rejection they were to shake the dust off their feet as testimony against them. This was an action symbolic of what Jesus had earlier implied verbally to his family in Nazareth. In this act, the twelve were saying that if people refused to join this new Israel, they were no longer Israel, but were gentiles. As Cranfield writes,

The dust of a heathen land was carefully removed from the feet and clothing by pious Jews before re-entering Jewish territory, as something defiling. So the significance of the action here enjoined is to declare the place which rejects them heathen. At the same time it is to give warning that the missionaries have fulfilled their responsibility toward the place and henceforth the inhabitants must answer for themselves.<sup>5</sup>

## III. Implications of our story

### A. Rejection, though painful, is necessary, so expect it

Rejection is part and parcel of being a disciple of Christ. Familiarity does not enhance spirituality; more than likely, it breeds contempt. It is difficult to identify and appreciate the work of the Spirit among those who know you best "in the flesh." That is why rejection often comes from those closest to us. We must face the fact that we probably will never get the praise and recognition we so long for from our family of origin, or those who are closest to us.

This leads us to our second principle.

### B. Rejection, though painful, is profitable, so welcome it

Rejection thrusts us into the new and larger family, and onto a stage much larger than home. This stage encompasses the whole world. It takes us to places we thought we would never go and sets us free to love with a larger capacity than we ever dreamed. That gaping ache of rejection becomes the channel for divine love, so we should welcome it.

### C. Our role as disciplers in the new creation

What is the best gift we can give the next generation, the gift that will foster faith like nothing else? The best gift my parents ever gave me was being *sent*. I was sent away to school, and later sent away to another country to study. In that larger foreign world outside my home, with no props of support, I discovered the love of Christ and his body. In this church we find that whenever young people are "sent" to a larger stage than home, "sent" to walk in a new arena where we are not there to care for them and protect

them, it is there they discover the kingdom of God, the love of Christ, and, best of all, who they are in Christ.

My children are now at this stage. Emily and I are in the process of learning to let go and to *send* them out. A good friend has been a wonderful model to me in this area. Last week, his sixteen-year old daughter was baptized. In response to the emotion of the day, he wrote her a beautiful poem that expresses the power and joy in letting go a precious child to discover a bigger world in the body of Christ.

TALITHA KUM  
Mark 5:41

Little girl, arise.  
I say to you, little girl, arise!

There is a way of life  
that leads to destruction.  
There is a way of life  
that leads only to desolation and  
utter oblivion.  
It is a dry dust that is harsh in the nostrils of the West  
wind  
a powder of chaff  
that rolls aimlessly adrift beneath the mountain of God  
beneath the habitation of the Most High  
a compost where nothing takes root  
and no legacy is left on the face of the earth  
and nothing lifts to the skies.

And there is a way of life  
that leads surely to death of another kind.  
Today, my child, gathering around you  
a host of witnesses watched as the heavens were torn  
open  
and a silent voice shouted  
she's alive!

And, also today, in a way  
I died.  
For the Owner of The Vineyard  
came home to rest  
and take to his breast all that is rightfully His.  
His cup bearer and steward  
for sixteen years  
He entrusted you to me and to your mother  
A greater gift I have never known

Oh daughter of mine!  
greater to me than any son could ever be  
except the one who died  
the Son of the Owner of The Vineyard  
He, a father, too  
lost his son for you.  
His soul is full of sorrow  
and yet throughout His tears  
He's not forgotten you.  
And today, today of all days  
we killed the fatted calf for,  
He's not forgotten you.  
You see His journey was always to return  
and claim you  
my daughter  
as His daughter  
and His bride.

So today  
my Child  
know that death will never touch you  
Oh, you'll know the pain and  
sorrow, too  
And it will take your breath away  
But you will never die.  
So, Talitha Kum  
Arise!

**Therefore from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh...Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. (2 Cor 5:16-17)**

May God grant us the grace to allow our children, both physical and spiritual, the freedom to go. Amen.

1. Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1997), 176.
2. Translation of Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 289.
3. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 195.
4. Gundry, *Mark*, 292.
5. Cranfield, *Mark*, 200-201.

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