

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

*Mark 6:1-13*

July 5, 2009

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*"... his own country...."*

The gospel lesson for the day begins this way: *He (Jesus) went away from there and came to his own country ... and his disciples followed him. ... to his own country....* That's a good thing, isn't it, to be in one's own country?

I hope that you have spent some time this weekend thinking about your country. We are still very much a work in progress, and some of our greatest challenges may well lie before us, but we are a people born in dire circumstances... a people with some remarkable gifts to share with the world. *Dire circumstances?* If you have not read David McCullough's *1776*, you may not know how fragile was our beginning. And *remarkable gifts?* We saw an example just this past week.

More than seven months after the votes were cast, Minnesota finally has a new senator. You saw the story. This past week, the Minnesota Supreme Court declared Al Franken the winner of last November's senatorial election by a total of 312 votes out of 2.8 million cast. That is a margin of victory of .0075%. Franken's opponent, Norm Coleman, conceded the election upon hearing the Supreme Court's decision, and Franken will be in the Senate when it reconvenes after the July recess. There were no riots on the streets of Minneapolis. No violent demonstrations in Moorhead or Moosejaw. Best I can tell, a Lutheran bishop of Minnesota did not feel the need to weigh in and confirm Franken's victory. It took seven months, but the people of Minnesota now have two senators to represent them in the halls of Congress. All of this occurred while we were hearing the results of another election.

Hours after the polls closed in Tehran, the streets were full of demonstrators protesting what seemed to many to be a mockery of an election. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed an overwhelming victory over Mirhossein Mousavi. Violence ensued. Lives were lost. Iran's leading cleric, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared the election valid and urged the punishment of would-be protestors. Over a thousand persons were arrested, although reports claim that most have been released.

The contrast, of course, could not be more stark. I mention this just to illustrate how I feel when I hear those words... *to his own country*. Among the many things that I would lift up as we celebrate the birth of our nation - nothing makes me more grateful than the fact that we trust our electoral process, that we have committed ourselves to the orderly transfer of power, and that religious leadership plays no determining role in who will lead our nation. That is not to say that the way we choose our leadership is always untainted... it is not. Sometimes chads are dimpled or hanging... sometimes votes are bought... sometimes people come back from the grave to cast their ballot. We do not always do it perfectly, but in the grand scheme of things, we live in a country in which leaders are chosen by the people and accountable to the people who choose them, in which there is an unspoken social contract that the transfer of power will not be an occasion for violence. With all of its challenges and imperfections, I am grateful for my country.

I wonder how Jesus felt about his country. How will he be received when he returns? Now, the word *country* may be a little misleading. During his lifetime, Israel did not govern itself. It was occupied territory - a vassal state of imperial Rome. The Jewish rulers, secular and religious, held their position with the approval of the Roman authorities. My guess is that Jesus was no fan of the Roman occupation forces, but the gospel witness is clear that he rejected violence as a strategy for national liberation. His concern was with another kingdom.

Roman power was concentrated in Jerusalem, the reality that made Jesus' last Passover pilgrimage to that great city especially dangerous. But Jesus was not from Jerusalem. When Mark says... *He... came to his own country...* Mark means the region of the Galilee, particularly his home town of Nazareth - an out of the way little place that probably attracted minimal attention from the ruling authorities. That's where Jesus went when Mark says... *He... came to his own country.*

What is it like to return to your own country? To your own people? To the place where you grew up, where the sights and sounds have a comfortable familiarity to them? For some of us, not all, but for some of us, it conjures up warm feelings and wonderful memories. I grew up in Nashville, Tennessee. I haven't lived there in over forty years, but every time I go back there... drive down Hillsboro Road through Green Hills village, past the shopping center that used to be my personal wooded playground, I just feel like I'm eight or nine years old again. Memories flood back. Friendships are remembered. ... *his own country.* I wonder if Jesus welcomed the opportunity to return to his own country.

He has been on the road. Has traveled throughout the Galilee. Made his base of operations in the little fishing village of Capernaum. He has recently gone to the other side of the lake - to Gentile territory, outside the Jewish homeland. But now, at last, he has come home... *to his own country.* Is he glad to be back? Is he wondering how he will be received?

He finds out soon enough. Maybe it's time to read the story as Mark tells it.

### Mark 6:1-13

Perhaps you expected Jesus to be welcomed home as a celebrity he had become. Little parade. Speech on the synagogue steps. Key to the city. Local boy made good. It did not happen. *Where did he get all this? Just a carpenter. Mary's boy. Who does he think he is?* And his friends and neighbors - the people he had grown up with, worshiped with - were offended by him.

Was it jealousy? Who's immune? Do we always rejoice in someone else's success... particularly if that someone is a friend or acquaintance? I read in the last issue of my college alumni magazine that a classmate of mine was recently appointed to the Board of Directors of Wells Fargo Bank. Just for fun, I googled him, and discovered that until his recent retirement he had been the CEO of a corporation in North Carolina, and that in 2006 *Forbes Magazine* reported that he ranked 369<sup>th</sup> in executive compensation. Wait a minute. I know this guy! Nice enough. Smart... but no Bill Gates. I have to tell you, I hear my own voice when I hear the people of Nazareth say: *Where did he get all this? Just a carpenter. Mary's boy... Simon's brother. Jealousy?*

Or familiarity. How can something that we know well be important... special... unique. By their silence, the gospels suggest that before John the Baptist began preaching down at the Jordan

River, Jesus had not done anything to make the people of Nazareth believe that he was someone special. He was a carpenter, not a rabbi. He was Mary's boy, not someone sent by God.

Sometimes, people dismiss Christian faith because they don't know a thing about it. That's pretty common these days. They have this image of Christians as judgmental, narrow-minded people who think of themselves as better than everyone else, closer to God, the only ones who know the truth. They think that Christian faith is about believing things reasonable people can't believe. They think of churches as dangerous places... places where people who think they're perfect condemn those who are not. I recently heard a woman say that she was afraid to come to church after she was divorced. Now she is a bright and intelligent woman, but she was afraid. On the Sunday when she found out that the preacher was going to talk about divorce, she stayed home, listened to the service on the radio. Now there are churches where she would not have been welcomed, but not all, not this one. Sometimes people dismiss and discount what they do not know.

But I don't think that's what happened in Nazareth. I do not think that Jesus' friends and neighbors dismissed him because they did not know him. I think they discounted him because they knew him well. Is it possible to be so familiar with something that we become blind to how remarkable it really is? Is it possible that the people of his own country could not hear him because they thought that they knew all there was to know about him? I think of the moment in *Forest Gump* when Forest is reunited with Lt. Dan. Forest saved Lt. Dan's life in Vietnam, but both of Lt. Dan's legs were amputated below the knee and he is now confined to a wheel chair. Forest receives the Medal of Honor... Lt. Dan finds relief in a bottle of Ripple wine. Lt. Dan tracks Forest down: *I can't believe they gave YOU the Medal of Honor!* And then he goes on a little rant. *All those people over at the V.A.... all they want to talk about is Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. I am sick and tired of hearing about Jesus.* Sometimes I wonder if Christians have a harder time being attracted to, awed and inspired by, committed to, this one whom they already know. The numbing effect of familiarity.

I am sorry to tell you that when Jesus went to his own country, he was not warmly received. His neighbors were not hostile, just indifferent. And in the face of that indifference, he could do not mighty work there.

I want Jesus to be well received. I want him to be heard and embraced and followed in his own country, and in mine. I want him to be welcomed by the hostile and the indifferent and the Christians. I want him to be heard by those who have never heard of him and by those who know him best. Why? He will change your life.

Forest and Lt. Dan strike up a friendship, only because Forest cares for him, respects him, all without judging him. They go into business together - Bubba Gump Shrimp Company, and Forest makes the cover of *Forbes Magazine*. And the day finally comes when Lt. Dan, sitting on the gunwale of the shrimp boat, turns himself around and falls into the water and contentedly backstrokes away as the sun sets. As Forest says... *although he never said so, I think Lt. Dan made his peace with God.* And how did that happen? I think Lt. Dan finally met Jesus... unexpectedly. He just thought that his name was Forest.