

Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 6, 2003

“Home Field Disadvantage”

Mark 6:1-13; Ezekiel 2:1-5

Wednesday night this past week, Mary Ellen and I went to the Pirates game. They lost. After leading the Reds for 8 innings, and with only one strike left in the top of the 9th to win the game, things fell apart, the Reds scored two runs to go ahead 4 to 3.

Now, I grew up in Atlanta. And I have to say that while there are a lot of reasons I like Pittsburgh better than Atlanta, baseball is a struggle. In Atlanta, if the Braves’ are behind by one run in the bottom of the 9th, the thing to do is stay in the park, yell at the top of your lungs (a sort of a Rebel yell), do the Tomahawk chop, and root your team to victory.

But that’s not what happened at PNC Park on Wednesday. As the Pirates came to the plate in the bottom of the 9th, the fans were leaving in droves. Apparently they had given up all hope that the home team would score even one run to keep the game alive.

It made me feel some sympathy for the recently released first-baseman Kevin Young, who was given a hard time in the press for commenting that it was hard to win games when you have “no home field advantage.”

That was probably the wrong thing to say in public, but he’s not entirely off the mark. The enthusiasm of the home crowd, or the lack thereof, makes a difference; which is something Pittsburghers seem to know when it comes to football.

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There is someone else who might sympathize with Kevin Young’s lament. Jesus knew something about having a “home field DIS-advantage.”

In the gospel reading today, Jesus, who has been warmly received throughout Galilee, comes to his hometown to find his own family and friends skeptical about his ministry unwilling to believe what others believe. By the end of his stay, Jesus is dumbfounded, amazed at their unbelief, and he leaves his hometown, unable to do any deeds of power there.

It is interesting to see the contrast between this story
and the story about Jesus calming the storm a few pages before.
After Jesus saves his disciples from the storm
they are left in bewilderment, asking the question,
“Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

But in Jesus’ hometown, the people are not asking that question.
Instead, they assume they know just exactly who Jesus is:
He is a carpenter. Mary’s son. They know his brothers and sisters, too.

The Greek word here which we translate "carpenter" is *tekton*,
which may be more properly translated "builder".
A *tekton* was not limited to working with wood,
but could use stone or even metal in building.

If Jesus was a carpenter or builder in Greco-Roman society,
he belonged to the Artisan class,
which was one of the lower classes
somewhere between the Peasants and a group called the Degradeds
or Expendables.

This means Jesus did not quite fit the picture of one who aspired to be a prophet.
His origins were too common.

So the hometown folks just cannot see it.
“He is a carpenter. We know his mother, Mary,
and his brothers James and Joses and Judas and Simon;
and are not his sisters here with us, too?
We know all about Jesus,
so how could he possibly have such wisdom and power?

Well, as the story turns out,
Jesus hometown friends may *think* they know him,
but they actually know very little about who he really is,
and they benefit very little from the gospel he would preach
and the deeds of power would do in their midst
if they believed.

The response of Jesus’ hometown friends and family bring to mind
the warning offered by the scholars of the Jesus Seminar
in their book *The Five Gospels*
(You remember the group that made headlines a few years back
by telling us which lines attributed to Jesus in the New Testament
were actually his and which were the creation of the early church.
Even if you don’t agree with all of their conclusions,
the warning seems to be a good one):

“Beware of finding a Jesus [who is] entirely congenial to you.”

The implication being that if the Jesus you know
fits your expectations too closely or is too attractive to you,
you might be leaving something out;
you might be leaving out the part of Jesus that is meant to challenge you
meant to confront you,
meant to call you to repentance and new life.
Just like Jesus’ old hometown friends who thought they knew him so well.

But Jesus leaves his hometown feeling dishonored.
*Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown,
and among their own kin, and in their own house.*

So he leaves town and goes out to other villages to continue his mission.

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Then we come to Part Two of our reading.
And it is surely no accident that this next story is placed where it is in the Gospel.
It is the story of Jesus sending out the 12 disciples on their missionary journey,
and it comes right after this story of Jesus’ rejection.
So when Jesus gives the 12 their instructions,
he makes it a point to tell them what to do
when *they* face rejection for preaching his gospel.

*If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave,
shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.*
(which was a sign of a curse, a cutting off of fellowship.)
Don’t waste your energy, he says. Just move on.

Really, the whole story of Jesus’ ministry as the gospels tell it
is a story of Jesus gradually being rejected by more and more people.
The story of Jesus’ passion and crucifixion is the dramatic culmination of this rejection.
He is condemned by the Jewish leaders,
hung on a cross by the Roman Empire,
and deserted by his closest friends.

So it should not seem strange that those who follow Jesus,
might face a similar rejection.
Being a disciple of Jesus might make you un-popular and even offensive to some.
And if you don’t face any rejection from anyone for being a disciple,
you might ask yourself who it is you’re really following.

Well, what about you and me?
What about the Church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century in America?

Or more broadly, North America? Even more broadly, “The West.”
We live in Western culture,
 which has been saturated in Christendom for centuries.
Our society, our culture, has been influence so powerfully by the Christian religion
 that apart from Christianity, the Western world would not be recognizable
 as the West – it would be something entirely different.
We live in a land in which most people still consider themselves “Christian”
 (at least in the surveys)
 whether or not they currently belong, or have ever belonged, to any church.
You might say there is a sense in which we even feel like...
 well...like we live in Jesus’ hometown;
 we live in God’s country (especially this weekend!).
We are pretty sure we’ve got Jesus figured out! We *know* who he is!

Which, on the face of it, may seem like a good thing:
 we live in a land that is so saturated with Jesus
 that almost everybody knows who he is.
But do they know him?
Or do they know some culturally accommodated version of Jesus?
Has the Jesus of the biblical text been obscured?
 The Christ of the early church been weakened?
 The gospel of repentance been watered down
 into feel good, ear-tickling mush about happiness & prosperity.

Perhaps we who have received a knowledge of Jesus as our American birthright
 need to listen to this story in the Gospel of Mark,
 about a place where everybody knows who Jesus is,
 and Jesus has to leave that place because
 they do not honor him;
 which suggests that they do not really know him after all.

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The text of Mark is pretty clear,
 that to follow Jesus, to go where he leads
 and to reach out in his name
 in a place where everybody thinks they already know him
 can be difficult at times,
 and can have less than spectacular results at times.

Yet that is what Jesus calls us and sends us to do.
 Right here on our home field. Our home mission field.
And being on the home field of Christendom, in a land of Jesus-saturation,
 is probably a disadvantage
 to truly hearing Jesus and believing in Jesus.
That’s why America is one of the greatest mission fields today, and most challenging.

And just as Jesus' rejection was the pathway to resurrection and new life,
so are we called to risk that same rejection
for the sake of making him known.

The text says the 12 *went out and proclaimed that all should repent.*
They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick
and cured them.

That is to say, we have reason to hope
that our ministry in Jesus' name can change people's lives.
Certainly not everyone we met. Maybe not even most.
And there will be those who outright reject us.
But, if we're rejected for bearing witness to a Jesus who strikes people as odd,
and not what they expected,
then we'll be in good company; we will not be lonely;
for Jesus will be there with us
shaking his head in amazement
and urging us to move on.