

Offended By Wisdom

Mark 6: 1-13

Emily Peck McClain, Sunday, July 9th , 2006

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Last weekend I was in Chicago for my aunt's wedding. It was a great gathering of family, lots of joy and lots of love. As I was walking with my parents to the hotel from the rehearsal dinner, my dad looked at a particularly odd building that went very high but wasn't very wide and marveled, "How do you think they decided when to stop going up?" I was so excited that I knew the answer to that question I could hardly contain myself! There's not much information I know that I can teach my dad, except maybe about religion. At any rate, I said, with confidence, "Well Dad, it's all about zoning laws." I proceeded to tell him about air rights and zoning laws, the things you learn when you live in New York City and the church where your husband worked on the East side are selling their air rights.

The next day, we met up with a high school friend of my dad's and walked around the city. This friend is also an architect and pointed out to us the first building he designed. My dad shoots me a sly look and asks him, "Bill, how do you decide how tall to make a building?" Bill of course responded, "Well, Tom, it's all about zoning laws." Only then did he look at me with that "impressed father" look, nodding. Now, I realize that

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ministry is my specialty and architecture is Bill's specialty, but why didn't
my dad believe me without having to check my facts?!

Ever feel like your family never lets you grow up? I know that my
brother and I still bicker like we're 12. It's like as soon as we get around
each other we forget that we're both adults, both have jobs, both have
spouses, both have our own places to live and instead see each other as the
person who's so dang hard to share a bathroom with while trying to get
ready for school. Sometimes the hardest place to be yourself, in whatever
ways you've grown and changed, is with your family and around people
who have known you for your whole life.

In today's Gospel, the same thing is going on. Okay, not the same
thing, since you probably don't go back to your hometown or to your
parents' house or visit with people who have known you your whole life to
preach and heal sick people, but it is similar!

Jesus has been hard at work, according to Mark. Already he's calmed
the sea, he's healed a man of a legion of demons, he's healed a
hemorrhaging woman and raised a dead girl to life. He already has disciples
who are following him and learning from him as he teaches about the
kingdom of God. Now he returns to his hometown and people who heard
him said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has

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been given to him? Isn't this the carpenter?" They are offended. This man
who they've known for his whole life returns from adventures elsewhere to
teach them? Who does he think he is?

When Jesus comes close to home, we take offense. When we think
about people who have known us for our whole life, Jesus should come to
mind. After all, who knows us better than the God who made us? It is so
hard to hear from God, to hear wisdom from the One who knows us so well
and who has been with us since the beginning. Jesus comes close to home in
his teachings and in stories of people who lives here in his hometown,
people are astounded at what they hear from Jesus and in turn, he is amazed
at their unbelief. *Eklepso* and *thaumazo* are the two Greek words used here.
The first is a sense of awe or wonder; the second is astonishment, like being
bowled over with so much amazement. They are awed by what they hear
and Jesus is bowled over by the fact that they don't believe. I find this
particularly interesting, just as much as they think they know him, he thinks
he knows them. He wouldn't come to Nazareth to teach in the synagogue if
he thought it was pointless, right? He teaches in hopes that people will listen.
At least the disciples who are with him are listening, but not these people
from his hometown, not his family, not those who have known him since
childhood.

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It is precisely because they think they know everything about Jesus that they don't believe. They are surface people, they can't get beneath what they already know. There is prejudice here, and snobbery. They are offended because a man they think they know completely, a carpenter's son, is trying to impart wisdom to them. The lesson here is that you can know lots of surface things and still know nothing about that person. Their prejudice is an obstacle to faith, to truth, to wisdom. They can't receive the wisdom from Jesus or grow in their faith or see the truth about who Jesus is because they can't get beneath the surface. Why does the deliverer make the wisdom he is bringing offensive?

What is offensive about wisdom? What is offensive about being shown wisdom in unexpected way?

Wisdom is different from facts. Wisdom is insight, knowledge, and judgment. The ancient Romans and Greeks even had a goddess of wisdom. This is something gained by lived experience and truth, something expressed in our Bible in wisdom literature like Psalms, Proverbs, Lamentations, Song of Song, something incarnated in our theology of the Holy Spirit. Wisdom is highly valued in our society and in first century Judaism at the time of Jesus. Wisdom is sought after and desired. Here Jesus is offering it to his hometown, those gathered in the synagogue, and the people are offended.

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I can think of at least one reason people are offended at being offered wisdom – it insinuates they are without it. You wouldn't be offered something you already have, right? I think we suffer from the same sin of pride. It is hard to hear from God if God is telling us where we fall short, if God is telling us there is more for us to learn and more for us to do with the information, the wisdom, that we do learn.

It is Jesus' response to this offense that I really like. He continues. Prejudice and offense don't insult or injure Jesus. He doesn't dwell on it. He just continues doing what he is called to do – he teaches. He shares the good news of God's love and the coming of God's kingdom in more places. And he sends out the disciples with the same instructions that he himself seems to follow: heal people, take nothing with you, accept hospitality where it is offered, and move on if there is nothing but offense. After having just heard that prophets are only without honor in their hometown, the disciples, having been sent by and empowered by a prophet, are probably safely assuming that they will only encounter such offense in their hometowns.

“The Christian has a technique for defeat. It is to go on in trust, relying on the God who never comes to his “last chance” but who always has new doors of opportunity to open” (Interpreter's Bible, volume 7, p. 732). I don't think the folks from Nazareth have lost their only opportunity

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of accepting wisdom. God will open new doors. Perhaps some of the
disciples will wander back to Nazareth with the same message of wisdom
and they'll be able to hear it better than they did from the son of a carpenter.

Jesus, as a prophet, was treated like a stranger at home so the disciples
are sent out to at home among strangers to preach the gospel (Interpreter's
Bible). This is how we are being sent out, too. We are here to hear and to
receive wisdom from God. This is why we study the Bible, this is why your
pastors invite you to explore more deeply a part of that text during a sermon,
this is why we sing hymns that contain wisdom in music and in poetry, this
is why we pray together and share experiences with each other. Like the
disciples, we are here to hear. Bearing this wisdom, we are sent out to feel at
home with strangers and to accept that sometimes, those who have known us
the longest will only take offense at the experience of God we have to share.