Mark 6:1-6: A sermon delivered on July 5, 2009 by The Rev. Brian G. Palmer

They rejected Jesus

What are we to make of today’s gospel?

Let’s begin with the obvious question: How could Jesus’ family and friends reject him? They watched him grow up. They had to be aware of his loving nature and the fact that he worked hard, both as a student of the Torah and as Joseph’s apprentice. Before leaving home he was acknowledged as a rabbi, a teacher, and he had disciples whom he taught.

We can assume they heard about his success in ministry. Nazareth was only a short distance away from Capernium which was his base of operations. News traveled by word of mouth from one town to another and everyone was eager to hear and share what they heard.

We have listened over the last four Sundays to Mark’s gospel about the success of Jesus’ ministry: how the crowds listened to his teachings, expressed in parables; how they witnessed the healing of the sick and the possessed, and how astounded they were when Jesus brought Jairus’ daughter back from the dead.

You may recall that in the synagogue at Capernaun the people were “amazed” and “accepted” his new way of teaching. But in the synagogue we visited today in Nazareth they were “offended,” and they rejected him, crying out:

“Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?”

Now it’s interesting to note, that in this context, the original Greek word for “offense” means *stumbling block*. And I suspect there was something emotional that blocked their acceptance of Jesus. What stumbling block might they have had?

Well to begin with, they lived in a Roman-occupied territory. It was dangerous for everyone, especially the Jews. Their relationship with the Romans was awkward at best. So they probably tried to keep a low profile and not do anything that would draw attention to themselves.

Jesus very association with them as a “son” of Nazareth was threatening from a political point of view. We can imagine that they were afraid that they would become tainted by his actions, that the principalities and powers would conclude that Jesus came out of a revolutionary atmosphere in Nazareth and might seek to crush that spirit.

So they sought ways to dismiss him, using time-honored methods: they belittled his lack of formal education; they made light of his occupation as a carpenter, and; they criticized his family as being one of little consequence.

It is noteworthy that this rejection was not limited to Jesus’ fellow townspeople. Even his family and his wider circle of relatives rejected him and his testimony.
There’s also the theory of familiarity breeding contempt.

The Roman philosopher, A.pul.e.ius, perhaps first coined this phrase when he wrote: “Familiarity breeds contempt—while rarity wins admiration.”

Not to be upstaged, Mark Twain wrote that “Familiarity breeds contempt—and children.

Jesus even invited this spin with his response, “A prophet is not without honor, except in their own hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.”

Whatever the reason, or reasons, for their rejection of Jesus, I think we can safely assume that their hearts were hardened and therefore they were not open to Jesus’ teaching. How sad for them.

They rejected Jesus.

…and their rejection hurt him. Mark tells us “he could do no deed of power there” and “was amazed at their unbelief.” Their blatant rejection hindered his ability to do deeds of power among them; at the most, he could only “lay his hands on a few sick people and cure them.”

How beautifully this passage illustrates Jesus’ humanity. Like us, he felt the pain of rejection, not only with his homecoming but increasingly through the rest of his ministry and ultimately on the cross. Through Jesus’ humanity we know that “God feels our pain.”

And he needs us.

This reading points out how the participation of the people through the exercise of their faith was strategic to Jesus’ effectiveness to transform lives; they were not simply observers, but participants in Jesus’ work. And their rejection of Jesus resulted in their own rejection of what he was capable of doing for them.

How does this passage relate to our lives? Well, in several ways.

When we reject strangers—we reject Jesus.

It doesn’t matter what our rejection is based on. When we reject others we do not love them as we were commanded to…and we limit God’s hand in their lives and in ours.

When we reject those closest to us—we reject Jesus.

It’s so easy to belittle family members, to dismiss them and to show disappointment in them because they are not the people we wanted them to be.

Why is it that we are hardest on those to whom we are most familiar? The answer to this question is best given by a psychologist, but let it suffice to say that when we deny our loved ones love we limit their ability to love and support us. And we limit God’s work through them and through us.
There is a relationship between what we give and what we receive. Twentieth century theologian and writer, Frederick Buechner, was right I believe, in asserting that miracles do not evoke faith so much as faith evokes miracles.

Mark tells us in this chapter that Jesus recognized that he was a disowned "prophet without honor," and as a result, he withdrew from the close familial and neighborhood ties of the past and began in earnest the creation of a new community, a new family in God, and a new political-economic-religious order, which we call the “kingdom of God.”

And Jesus recognized that that new order could only be built by going beyond one’s own immediate community.

Thus, he sent forth his disciples two-by-two to discover that potential community among those whom they met or healed or taught or stayed with in their homes across all of Galilee. And among those former strangers, Jesus build an alternative community to that of Israel, a community with all of its conflicts, its tragedies as well as victories, and its struggle to understand and embrace the mission to which Jesus called it.

He and his disciples went out with “no bread, no bag, no money in their belts” to build together the shalom community in the midst of a Yahweh-aware society that rejected all that Yahweh was about because of their fear of the dominating “principalities and powers” of their world and their hardened hearts.

We are members of that new community. We are participants in God’s plan. Through our open hearts and acceptance of others we welcome the stranger and the loved one to the Kingdom of God. We become partners with God in the transformation of lives.

Never underestimate the power of God to take the most unlikely character and do something miraculous with him or her. Consider the prophets, David whom his father initially rejected to lead his people in battle, the first disciples, Paul the most unlikely of disciples and so on.

By the way, Jesus did not give up on his family and friends back home. His brother, James, went on to lead the church in Rome and we understand that Jesus’ other siblings became followers. Joseph, by the time of Jesus’ return to Nazareth, had died, but there can be no doubt about his faith or that of Jesus’ mother, Mary.

As for the rest, we know that God’s love extends to everyone. Despite rejection, Jesus forgave and he died on the cross for all our sins.

Let us never reject Jesus by rejecting others.

Amen.

Ezekiel 2:1-7

The Lord said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD.” Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. And you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks,
for they are a rebellious house. You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house.

**The Psalm**

**Psalm 123 Page 780, BCP**

*Ad te levavi oculos meos*

1 To you I lift up my eyes, *
   to you enthroned in the heavens.

2 As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, *
   and the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,

3 So our eyes look to the LORD our God, *
   until he show us his mercy.

4 Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy, *
   for we have had more than enough of contempt,

5 Too much of the scorn of the indolent rich, *
   and of the derision of the proud.

**The Epistle**

**2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

**The Gospel**

**Mark 6:1-6**

Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is
not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching.