***The Blindness of Overfamiliarity*** *a sermon delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno based in Mark 6:1-13*

From the dawn of civilization until the time of Jesus, it appears that human life hardly changed. I mean, okay, farming gradually replaced hunting & gathering. Beer was invented when rain got into someone’s store of grain and it fermented and people, as a result, decided to live in larger living groups so they’d always have a surplus of grain to make beer from. Those were big movements, but next to nothing else changed. People went from wearing animal hides to plant fibers. Humans went from wielding stone tools, to bronze tools, to tools made of iron. The Romans invented cement. There, I’ve covered the big ones in five sentences.

But, you know, up to the time of the Crusades, most people traveled no more than 5 or 6 miles away from the place of their birth in a lifetime. Traders, soldiers, and sailors moved about freely since ancient times, but most people stayed put. Everything they busied themselves with was in the narrow scope of one zip code from birth to death. They expected little from themselves and they expected next to nothing from anyone else. No surprises.

Which fits perfectly with the story we have today before us about Jesus and his return to his tiny home village, Nazareth. He's experienced quite a lot of success in his ministry.  In the weeks preceding his return, he has secured the loyalty of twelve disciples, taught the people about the reign of God and how different it was from the reign of Caesar. He has dazzled people far and wide with his provocative parables, exorcised demons, healed the sick, calmed a storm, raised a little girl from the dead. You’d think he’d have become something of a local hero. But that is not what Mark’s gospel tells us.

In this morning’s story, Jesus enters the synagogue of his boyhood and begins to teach in the tradition of the rabbis.  At first, things go very well; his townspeople receive his words with astonishment and curiosity.  “Where did this man get all this?” they ask one another.  “What is this wisdom that has been given to him?  How remarkable are the accounts of all that is wrought by his hands!”

But then, instead of self-congratulations, instead of the townspeople lifting Jesus onto their shoulders and parading him around town, something else happens.

Biblical interpreter, Debi Thomas imagines it this way: “Someone in the crowd — perhaps a jealous old neighbor of Mary’s, or a childhood rival of Jesus’s, or the notorious village gossip who loves stirring up dissension — starts asking prickly questions: ‘Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?  (C- students, the lot of them). Are not his sisters here among us?’"

At this point, the text tells us, the mood in the synagogue shifts.  Appreciation morphs into accusation, curiosity becomes contempt, and the people “take offense.”  They decide that Jesus is presuming too much; exceeding his bounds.  He’s just not “staying in his lane,” to use a phrase we’ve lately come to employ.

Apparently that phrase became prominent in 2018, when the National Rifle Association criticized emergency room doctors in the United States for commenting on America’s gun crisis.

Doctors should “stay in their lane,” the N.R.A tweeted.  That is, they should practice medicine and stick to their areas of expertise, instead of expressing opinions on subjects they know nothing about.  The doctors responded immediately by sharing stories of patients who had arrived in their emergency rooms following traumatic gun-related injuries or deaths.  “ThisIsOurLane,” they tweeted.

Boundaries are critical. Part of maturity has to do with having good boundaries; knowing what we should busy ourselves with and what we ought to stear clear of. However, the text today says we should not be too glib in using the phrase.

Jesus’ family and neighbors were clearly threatened by his gifts. They were, frankly, troubled by his talent, his ambition, how articulate he was. He seemed uppity to them. They ran him down by saying he just wasn’t acting like his mother’s son.

In her sermon, “Sapping God’s Strength,” Barbara Brown Taylor points out that the only reason to identify a man by his mother in Jesus’s day is to question the circumstances of his birth.  To highlight the fact that no one knows for sure who his father is by referring to Jesus as “the son of Mary” is a calculated smack-down on the part of his fellow villagers. It’s a weaponized use of Jesus’s birth story to humiliate him into silence.

In a social system where one’s status is fixed at birth, it’s not the norm for someone like Jesus — a mere carpenter of questionable parentage — to amount to anything.  He has no business rising above his dicey beginnings, no business becoming a leader, much less the Messiah.  “We know exactly where you come from, boy!  Don’t get too big for your britches!  Remember your place!”

The one really curious outcome of this story is that the townspeople’s suspicion and resentment diminish Jesus’s ability to work miracles on their behalf.  “He could do no deed of power there,” Mark writes with grim finality.  In some mysterious and disturbing way, the people's small-mindedness, their inability to embrace a new facet of Jesus's life and mission, keep them in spiritual poverty.  Their negativity *constrains* Jesus.  It *blocks* the healing work he longs to do for the people he loves.

Now, think about that.

Is I possible that our attitudes, the way we address the people around us, how we express ourselves at the grocery store, at church, at school about the issues of the day have real world consequences; that in the mysterious economy of God, we are called to participate with God’s Spirit in the transformation of the world but that our refusal to do so, or our jaded attitude about things might mess it all up?

Maybe something precious is lost when we fail to recognize the unfamiliar within the familiar.  When we turn a blind eye to the extraordinary within the ordinary.  We are apt to miss the presence of God in our midst.

So, how, when, and where do we miss out on the sacred because we expect God to stay in God’s lane; because we insist that Jesus speak in the timeworn ways we know best from a lifetime of hearing sermons or our memories of Sunday School?  Do we recoil when God shows up unexpectedly and dares to do a new thing?

Once in this gospel, you know, Jesus’s mom and siblings come to round him up because, well, he’s so unorthodox, they think he’s gone off his rocker. An alalogy today might be Robert Kennedy Jr.. Think of his family edging further and further away from him and his looney conspiracy theories as he runs for president. They say they love him, but he’s become a nut job.

Parker Palmer is a wonderful Quaker theologian who writes books, lectures, and leads workshops and retreats for church groups, nonprofits, and corporations.

He is much in demand and very busy. A few years ago he was visiting his mother, who at the time was in her eighties. She didn’t quite understand what her son was doing for a living, why he didn’t have a regular 9-to-5 job. Palmer explained patiently that he visits churches and universities and corporations. He lectures, conducts workshops, consults widely.

“I see,” she said. “You talk to people and they pay you for it.” “That’s right, Mother. I talk and they pay me. That’s what I do for a living.” “Well,” she said, “Parker, I like it when you come to visit and talk to me, but I certainly wouldn’t pay you for it.”

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “God is all around us, speaking to us through the most unlikely people. Sometimes it’s some mysterious stranger, but more often, I suspect, it is people so familiar that we simply overlook them—our own children and parents, our own friends and neighbors, all those hometown prophets who challenge us and love us and tell us who we are” (Bread of Angels).

The disconcerting truth about this week’s story is that we, the readers of this text, are the modern day equivalent of Jesus’s ancient townspeople. We’re the ones who think we know Jesus best; the ones jaded by religious over-familiarity.  What will it take to follow him into new and uncomfortable territory; to see him where we least desire to look?

Of course, Southminster has a long-held reputation in this Presbytery for thinking outside the box about Jesus. About ten years ago a conservative Presbyterian Church located in Southern Oregon, a church which, in fact, has since left our denomination, once asked our Presbytery to assemble a judicial commission to investigate Southminster because they said we veered from orthodox belief; we bring in liberal Bible scholars. We must be a bunch of heretics.

Well, the group just embarrassed themselves, doing it, and it became a badge of honor for this church.

In any case, this is why we look at these familiar texts together, you know, when they show up as they do regularly in the lectionary. Because, every generation finds new things to say about Jesus’s teachings and actions. Because, being human, we are likely to miss what might be right there in front of our eyes, unless we expect the spirit to open our eyes and hearts anew from time to time.

The uncomfortable fact is, Jesus *offends* his beloved community in this story, and, look -- if the Jesus we worship never offends us, then, my friends, it’s not really Jesus we’re worshipping.  Right?

When was the last time Jesus made you angry by stepping out of the lane you’ve placed him in?  When was the last time he questioned whatever it is you call holy — your conservatism, your progressivism, your 4th of July patriotism, your wokeness — take your pick. When did Jesus (whoever he is to you) challenge you to look beyond any of those things to find *him?*

The call of the Gospel is not a call to stand still.  It is a call to choose movement over inertia, change over security.  So I wonder: how do I refuse to let others in my life grow and change?  I’m not just talking about our concept of Jesus here. When do I box the people I love, or work next to, into identities that are narrow and constricting?

Do I allow the people I am close to to become what they are on their way to becoming?  Do I allow myself the same?  Or do I cut myself and others off with expectations that are stifling.

There is a negative voice in every one of us that says, *"You will always be small, weak, broken, insufficient, disappointing.  You will never outgrow your background, race, family, upbringing, wounds, addictions.”*

I heard that voice a lot when I was young. My dad worked for the phone company. I’m the first person in my family to go to college. Who was I to presume I could work at a white collar job? Was I a mere imposter going to graduate school twice?

Looking outwardly again, whose voices have we sidelined across history?  Whose perspectives do we still deem unworthy of prophetic authority because we like the biases and prejudices we’ve nursed for decades?

Here’s what I mean -- when Jesus tells his disciples to shake the dust off their sandals any time they meet with rejection and prejudice, he may be inviting them to indulge their feelings of resentment. To say, “Someday you’ll be sorry, you numbskulls.” He may be saying that, but I kind of doubt it.

Maybe, instead, he is inviting *us all* to face the future and shake *the dust of the past* off our Keen sandals, our Birkenstocks, our flip-flops (whatever you like wearing). Whether these things you’re challenged to leave behind are failures or hurts, confusion or disappointment, he may be asking us to look to the future.  
  
So ask yourself today, along with me: Do my actions and my attitude encourage or inhibit the coming of God, breaking into the present moment, or am I too in love with the past, a real past or Leave It To Beaver, 1950s past I’ve mostly made up?

Remember, Jesus could not do what he had come to Nazareth to do because they inhibited him; and as strange as it may sound, we may find ourselves in their sandals. Especially we clergy types.

In his 1963 letter written from the Birmingham, Alabama Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of the need to stop the foot dragging on civil rights: He spoke directly to white clergymen who were saying to him, “be prudent – wait – the time isn’t ripe yet.”

To them, King said, *For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never” . . . "justice too long delayed is justice denied."*

*We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights . . . when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; . . . when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes . . . and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky . . .then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.*

This calls for discernment; for self-understanding. The national Democratic Party is having such a moment right now. The G.O.P. (the Grand Old Party) had such a reconning in the days following January 6th, 2021. Remember?

Lindsay Graham looked at what happened that afternoon at the Capitol -- !60 Capitol policemen and women seriously injured or dead; the outgoing president of the United States intentionally ignoring his own daughter when she warned him they were liable to lynch his own Vice President. Lindsey Graham said, “Enough.” And He repeated it. “Enough.” Of course. It was finally enough.

But the Grand Old Party – the party of Tom McCall (best governor in the history of this state); the party of Mark Hatfield (maybe the most distinguished member of the Senate in my long lifetime), that party chose to double-down on a huge lie about the election and the violence incited in its wake and chose instead to embrace the perpetrator.

I wonder what the Democrats will do and how that will jibe with the movement of the Spirit today. I have no idea.

Some voices from both sides of that party are saying, “Don’t rock the boat.” “Stay in your lane.” I don’t pretend to know who is right. I just know this is a testing time and the stakes could not be higher.

Amen