

“The Toughest Crowd” (Mark 6:1-5)

Pentecost 5, July 5, 2009

I've got a blonde joke for you. This blonde walks into a Seattle bank and tells the loan officer that she's going to Europe for a month and wants to borrow \$4,000. He says they'll need some kind of collateral, so the blonde hands him the keys to a brand new Rolls Royce. She has the title and everything, so the loan papers are filled out, the car is driven into the bank's underground garage, and the blonde is on her way. Before long, though, word of this loan gets around the bank, and of course, everyone has a good laugh. Who but a blonde would secure a \$4,000 loan with a \$400,000 Rolls Royce? Well, a month later, the blonde returns and repays the \$4,000 plus the interest, which comes to \$15. The loan officer says, "Ma'am, we are happy to do business with you, but we are a little puzzled. According to our records, you are a multimillionaire. So why would you bother to borrow \$4,000?" "Simple," the blond replies. "Where else in Seattle can I safely park my car a whole month for only \$15?"

Pretty smart, that blonde! Wouldn't you say? And the loan officer? Not so smart after all. But that's what makes the joke so funny – and what brings home the point so well: *it's a big mistake to judge by appearances*. That's easy to do, so much easier than giving people the chance to show who they really are and what they're able to do. Human nature is lazy that way. But the thing is, such laziness can cost us dearly. That's a downside of prejudice we don't usually talk about, but it's true. Ask anyone who's been outsmarted by someone who didn't look so smart, or who's been taken advantage of by someone who seemed so innocent! *Judging by appearances? Big mistake!* And add to that how many times people with great potential are overlooked because they don't seem so great. Early in life, Einstein was written off as a lousy student; Lincoln was dismissed as a backwoods joker. And in recent years, how about that welfare mom, J. K. Rowling, who was turned down by a dozen publishers before she finally found someone who'd print *Harry Potter*? Bet they're kicking themselves now! So here, we see again! *Judging by appearances? Big mistake!*

And speaking of big mistakes, how about the one Mark describes in our text? Jesus has come home to Nazareth and preaches in the synagogue. He does a pretty amazing job of it, too! In the background, we overhear people murmuring, **“Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him?”** And you'd think this would be a pretty good sign, wouldn't you? But surprisingly, it's not. Mark tells us that far from reacting positively toward Jesus, this crowd takes **“offence at Him.”** And why? Because they think they know all about Him. **“Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?”** Yes, they think they know all about Jesus, and based on that, they think there's no way He should be saying and doing the things He is saying and doing! You see, in 1st century Judea, there is a very clear pecking order. Rabbis are close to the top. Carpenters are close to the bottom. So as far as these folks are concerned, Jesus has gotten a little “uppity.” Yes, they've *heard* that He has

done miracles elsewhere. *But a carpenter? Doing miracles? Especially a carpenter we know? Unbelievable.* And yes, they hear Him preaching with unusual wisdom. *But a carpenter? Preaching like that? “Where did this man get all this?” Just who does He think He is?* In short, these Nazarenes are so fixed on what they think they know about Jesus that they will not give Him the chance to show what He’s able to do. They take **“offense at Him.”** As a result, Jesus is unable to do any great deed of power there. Sure, He heals a few sick people, but that’s nothing compared to what He has done in the past and will do in the future. So Jesus leaves Nazareth on a note of sadness. Amazed at their unbelief, Jesus concludes, **“Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.”**

Now, when people read this story today, one question that comes up is why Jesus was unable to do any great deed of power there. Surely, Jesus *had* the power. Why not pull out all the stops and show the folks a thing or two? But actually, the answer to this question is given in our text. The hindrance was **“unbelief.”** Amazing **“unbelief”** made this a very different situation! You see, usually when Jesus worked a miracle, it was for people who had faith. In fact, how many times do we hear Jesus say, **“Your faith has made you well”**? Occasionally, He also worked miracles that did not require faith – the feeding of the five thousand, for instance – but absence of faith is one thing, unbelief is quite another. Unbelief is resistance to the Lord. Unbelief closes the door. Unbelief will not give Him the chance to show what He is able to do. And that was the hindrance in Nazareth. Judging by what they thought they knew about Him, the folks weren’t even willing to find out what Jesus could do – which cost them dearly, didn’t it? Think of the miracles Jesus could have performed for those Nazarenes – and would have, had it not been for their unbelief! Think of the blessings Jesus could have showered upon His hometown folks – and might have, had their negative attitude not gotten in the way! No doubt, some later had regrets about this, especially when they saw Jesus go on to do great things all across the land. But by then, it was too late. All they could do was kick themselves and admit: *Judging by appearances? Big mistake!*

So...what are the lessons for us today? Certainly, this story reminds us not to judge anyone by appearances. None of us may have the potential Jesus did, but still, potential is potential; it’s not something we want to waste. To the contrary, we want to give people a chance to show who they are and what they’re able to do. It can’t hurt, and it may lead to some pleasant surprises! So this is one lesson we want to learn. *Judging by appearances? Big mistake!*

Likewise, there is a message here for religious skeptics. One thing I’m seeing more and more these days is people rejecting Jesus without knowing much about Him; even rejecting Jesus based on misinformation – maybe something they picked up from their family, their friends, TV, a college religion class, or even books like *The Da Vinci Code*. Now, I know I’m preaching to the choir here, but it’s a dangerous thing to dismiss Jesus so casually, considering what’s at stake!

The Nazarenes found out too late how much it cost them not taking Jesus seriously, and that's nothing compared to what it will ultimately cost a person for not taking Jesus seriously as Savior and Lord. So it's dangerous – and dare I add? – it's also hypocritical. I mean, these days if there is one thing that's politically incorrect, it's judging someone by appearances. We're supposed to find out who they really are and what they're able to do. Well, why not give Jesus the same courtesy? Why just automatically choose unbelief? It can't hurt to find out who He really is, and learning what He can do may lead to some pleasant surprises – not the least of which is learning how to be sure of forgiveness and eternal life! So yes, there is definitely a message here for religious skeptics! *Judging by appearances? Big mistake!*

And that said, I think there also a message here for us believers – a subtler one, perhaps, but no less important – and that is: *not to assume we know Jesus as well as we could or should.*

Far be it from me to compare myself to Jesus, but one of the things I notice now and then is how people assume they know me better than they do. It can be quite comical. People assume, "Pastor wouldn't go for that," only to find out I think it's a great idea. Or people assume, "Pastor won't be interested in that," only to find out that I'm very interested. And here's an example closer to home. A few years ago at a family gathering, we were just sitting around the table talking, and the subject turned to politics. My niece then proceeded to tell me all about my political opinions and what she thought of them. It was all I could do to keep my jaw from hitting the floor. You see, I had never discussed politics with her. Not even once! There was no way she could know what I did or didn't think. She was just making assumptions based on...who knows what? And like I said, I don't want to compare myself to Jesus, but the point is: we don't want make false assumptions about Jesus, either.

For instance, there are things people assume are wrong that Scripture doesn't say a word against. Poor things! They suffer a lot of guilt over nothing! By the same token, there are things people assume are okay that God's Word expressly forbids – and then they wonder why their spiritual life suffers!

And how about all those assumptions about the way God works? "*Well, the Bible says, 'God will never give you more than you can handle.'*" No, it doesn't! That's not in the Bible at all! Or "*The Bible says, 'God helps those who help themselves.'*" No, it doesn't! That's from *Aesop's Fables!* Or "*Back in Bible times God may have worked miracles, but we shouldn't expect them today. In fact, we shouldn't ask God for things at all, just for inner peace, and patience, and so forth.*" Sounds so pious, doesn't it? But it's another false assumption – and one that goes directly *against* Jesus' teaching! It goes against specific verses like "**Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.**" In fact, it goes against whole sections of Jesus' teaching where He expressly invites prayer, calls for perseverance in

prayer, requires that we have faith in prayer, and promises to answer prayer. Another false assumption. And let's think about that! What does such an assumption become if it goes against what Jesus specifically said? It becomes a kind of unbelief, doesn't it? Selective unbelief, but unbelief nonetheless.

And think what that could cost us! Beyond the wear and tear on our relationship with God, it could cost us the very miracles and blessings we desire! Remember the words in James, "**You have not because you ask not**"? Wouldn't it be sad – and embarrassing – to stand before the Lord one day and hear Him say these very words? He would tell us, "I was willing to do these things for you, but you never asked." We'd answer, "We never asked because we assumed you didn't work that way." "Where did you ever get that idea?" He would say. And what would we reply? "Um, well... Don't know. Just assumed..." And can't you just see the look on His face as He tells us, "Sorry, but you assumed wrong." Man, would we be kicking ourselves then – for our selective unbelief!

Frankly, we can't afford such assumptions! They could cost us too dearly! So we need to weed them out. Especially when push comes to shove, each of us needs to ask ourself: *Why would I assume that because the Lord said no to my prayer in one situation, He won't yes to my prayer in this one? Why would I assume that because He didn't intervene in that situation, He won't intervene here and now? On what basis would I assume that? Not Scripture. Not logic. Not experience. So...on what basis?* The Nazarenes found out the hard way: *Judging by appearances? Big mistake!* Let's not repeat that mistake! The wiser course is to hold on to what Jesus specifically said about prayer, hold onto what He specifically promised and commanded. Ask! Seek! Knock! He may or may not give us the answer we want. That is His prerogative. But it sure beats sabotaging ourselves up front! And that's what we do when we operate on unbiblical assumptions – like the assumption that miracles don't happen anymore or that we shouldn't even ask for things. Life is tough enough as it is! Let's not make it tougher by sabotaging ourselves with assumptions!

You know, there are many times when people were amazed by Jesus, but Scripture only tells of one time when Jesus was amazed by people. It's in our text: "**He was amazed at their unbelief.**" A word to the wise: let's try not to amaze Jesus! Instead, let's give Him the chance to amaze us! As we go home, let's remember that we have a Lord for whom "**nothing is impossible,**" a Lord who is able to do "**abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.**" That's the assumption we want to go on. That's the assumption of faith! If we go on that, far from kicking ourselves later, we will experience the wonderful truth: that His grace really is sufficient for us, His power really is made perfect in weakness, and we really can do all things through Him who strengthens us! Amen.