

Sermon for Sunday, July 9, 2006
Pentecost 4

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Grace In The Ordinary

Today's lessons make one thing very clear, people of faith do not always do that great a job of reading all the signs of life that God gives us. The prophet Ezekiel is called by God to give the people, who did not listen well to God, a message. Would they listen?

From the gospel of Mark we read that the people in Jesus' hometown, of all places, would not accept him or his message. The elders and his old neighbors conceded that Jesus had both wisdom and power to heal. They said, "Where does this man get all this?" But based on their knowledge of his family and his very low class status, even though all the signs pointed to Jesus' being something very special, they would not believe that he could have a message from God for them. "Jesus was amazed at their unbelief."

When we as adults return to our home communities it almost always raises issues of credibility. "Little Johnny or Susie" can never be anything else. It seems that it has always been the case that the elders of communities have had the tendency to view the generation they spawned in this way. How could Jesus be anyone but Joseph and Mary's boy? Prophets did not come from carpenters' families. There was no way that the messiah could come from Nazareth. They were reading all the signs so specifically according to their social and religious codes and customs that they could no longer expect God to do something new, even when the signs that Jesus was demonstrating were so obvious.

I read a story this past week that demonstrates just how easy it is for us to misread the signs of life. A policeman was well hidden off the roadway one afternoon, with his radar gun aimed to monitor the speed of oncoming traffic. As he looked down the highway, he saw a car coming very slowly. When the vehicle finally got in range, his radar gun clocked the speed at 22 miles per hour. He watched with intrigue as the car slowly passed.

Realizing that a car going that slow was as much a hazard as a speeding car, he pulled in behind, put on his emergency lights and his siren to signal the car to pull over. As he approached the car he noticed that inside were five elderly ladies, two in the front and three in the back. They were all staring straight ahead, wide-eyed and white as a sheet.

The driver, obviously confused, said. "What's the problem, officer? I don't understand, I was going exactly the speed limit."

"Ma'am", replied the officer, "You weren't speeding, but you need to know that going under the posted speed limit can be a danger to other drivers."

"Slower than the speed limit? No sir, I was doing the speed limit exactly, 22 miles per hour," said the woman quite proudly.

The policeman, having put two and two together and trying to keep his composure, explained to the little old lady that “22” was the route number, not the speed limit. A bit embarrassed, the woman grinned and thanked the officer for pointing out her error.

“Well, no harm done, I guess,” said the officer. “But before I let you go I have to ask. Is everyone in this car okay? I mean, these women seem awfully shaken up, and they haven’t said a word since I stopped you.”

“Oh, they’ll be all right in a minute, Officer”, said the driver, “We just got off of route 119.”

These days, especially because these are troubled times, people of faith are working very hard to read the signs. But just as Jesus own people could not recognize him as the son of God we too can miss God’s most basic signs. We can create our own religious molds that Jesus has to fit and miss the real Jesus in our midst. The Jesus of the New Testament cared about both personal salvation and the suffering of all people. We can forget God’s most basic message that changes everything.

From a very ordinary carpenter’s family God chose to change the world. God’s first word to all people has always been a word of grace and unconditional love. The real Jesus transcended all the labels and expectations that people had of him. Jesus left the carpenter’s bench to become God’s teacher, reformer, and Savior of the world. Who could have guessed?

Yet even with the people’s knowledge of Jesus’ teaching and the promise inherent in his person, something seems to have been missing in Jesus’ visit to his hometown. The “magic” just wasn’t there. The text tells us “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. As Meister Eckhart put it: “God does not work in all hearts alike, but according to the preparation and sensitivity he finds in each.”

The preparation that God gives us is the gift of faith in our baptism. Through the gift of faith we are freed from our fears and concerns so that we can expect God to always be ready to do something new and unexpected. What God was doing in Jesus was so new, so unconventional and so unexpected that it is no wonder that few, if any could see what God was doing that day. Unfortunately we continue to put our trust in human certainties instead of in God.

David Brooks writes in the New York Times in “All Cultures Are Not Equal” that “Not long ago, people said that globalization and the revolution in communications technology would bring everyone in the world closer together. But the opposite is true. People are taking advantage of freedom and technology to create new groups and cultural zones. Our national identities and behavior patterns are proving surprisingly durable. People are moving into self-segregating communities with people like themselves, and building invisible and sometimes visible barriers to keep strangers out.”

We can all see that while the world seems to be becoming smaller there is more cultural strife between peoples. In our newfound provincialism we can become so immersed in our own issues that we do not listen to the concerns of others in the world. We hear about Iraq many times every day, but we only infrequently receive the news about all the suffering in east Africa that pastor Guta will share with us today.

Brooks continues to explain the situation today: “The economists and scientists tend to assume that material factors drive history – resources and brain chemistry – because what they can measure and count. But none of this helps explain a crucial feature of our time; while global economies are converging, cultures are diverging, and the widening cultural differences are leading us into a period of conflict, inequality and segmentation.”

One of the results of this is the rise in religious fundamentalism and other religious expressions that define God and the way that God works in this world in very narrow human terms. With those narrow religious constraints we lose the freedom that comes with faith that trusts God to do what is right.

In the verses just before those read today Jesus had traveled out of his country to heal gentiles who were amazed and filled with hope because God had done such a new thing. Jesus was there for others. By his teaching and actions he transcended all the expectations of the very religious. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in his “Letters and Papers from Prison” that “Our relation to God is not a ‘religious’ relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable- that is not authentic transcendence- but our relation to God is a new life in ‘existence for others,’ through participation in the being of Jesus.”

When we look at places of strife where conditions seem almost impossible, instead of falling into despair, we can be reassured that Jesus is there and in him God is already doing something new from the awful, but all too ordinary suffering in this world. As Jesus’ followers in faith we can be free to follow Jesus.

St. Paul gives us quite an example of reading the signs of life from his own personal struggle. He apparently had some physical ailment, some have guessed epilepsy. The thorn apparently kept Paul, who struggled from a supersized ego, humble. Knowing this Paul had asked God three times to heal him saying in effect, “I get the point of your thorn, now please remove it.” But Paul says that God’s answer was that the thorn stayed so that Paul could have no alternative but to rely on God’s grace and Christ’s power. In his weakness brought on by all of the struggles of his life God gave Paul the gift of real strength that comes from faith, not religious certainty. God surprised him each day with grace.

This is the gift that God gives to each of us. In faith we can put our trust in God. God will continue to do something new as God continues to renew the whole world. May we live from the strength of faith that opens our lives to trust the future to God and that fills us with hope and God’s active, unconditional love for the world. Amen.