

## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church - Watertown, WI

### “Hometown Boy”

Rev. David K. Groth - July 4, 2021

*“Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? . . . Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary. . .? And they took offense at him . . . And he could do no mighty works there . . . And he marveled because of their unbelief” (Mark 6:2-6).*

Jesus has come back to his hometown of Nazareth. It’s a small town, perhaps several hundred people, no more than a thousand. They were his neighbors, his parents, friends, maybe his aunts, uncles, and cousins. They knew him as only hometown folk know their own. They had watched him grow, watched him playing in the streets, watched him apprentice in his father’s trade. They watched as he took his turn as a reader in the synagogue as a young man.

It was whispered around Nazareth that he urged his zealous cousin, John, to baptize him. And then he disappeared; no one had seen or heard from him since. Some said he had been in the desert, alone, fasting. Others said he had been preaching and was recruiting a small group of followers. Some were even saying they heard he healed some sick people. (Not sure what to make of *that*.) Now He’s come home, so there’s more than a little curiosity surrounding him. The hometown folk are watching.

On the Sabbath, he did what everyone else did – he went to synagogue. It was small, intimate. Everybody knew everybody else. They took turns reading from the Torah, or the prophets, and the reader would say a few words of interpretation or commentary. And so, on the occasion of his return to Nazareth, after his mysterious absence, they asked Jesus to do the reading. Luke tells us he read from the prophet Isaiah, a wonderful passage about the coming of the Messiah. “He has sent me to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind.” Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, sat down and said, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, He was claiming to be that One, the long-awaited Messiah.

It was too much for his neighbors. Their initial curiosity and admiration took a decidedly negative turn. “Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary?” And they took offense at Him.

And did you notice the impact it had on Jesus? The text simply says, “He could do no miracles there”, an intriguing statement. The people of Nazareth saw no great potential in Jesus. And their refusal to accept anything extraordinary out of him rendered Jesus momentarily unable to do much for them. On the surface, at least, it seems the second person of the Trinity was undermined by their unbelief. They didn’t see the Messiah standing before them. All they could see was the hometown boy, Mary’s boy, the son of a carpenter. That was his assigned lot in life; he should be content with that. The text says they were astonished at his teaching, and He, in turn, is amazed by their unbelief. “He could not do any miracles there” Mark says.

Now, let’s think about this for a moment. Was He still the Son of God? Of course. Did He still have all power and authority to do great miracles? Absolutely. But because of their unbelief, they were neither asking for nor expecting anything from Him. Nor was Jesus going to give scoffers signs or evidence to prove his identity. His miracles were gifts to those who would receive them by faith, not proofs for those who refused to believe in Him. So, Jesus chooses not to do much in Nazareth. He’s not going to reward their unbelief. To them, He’s just the hometown boy.

“He could do no miracles there.” It’s a disturbing little verse. It means we also have the capacity to reject or limit Jesus with our unbelief. An example: There are many who believe Jesus was a good teacher, maybe even a prophet, but they refuse to confess him fully as Lord and Savior. They don’t believe him to be the Messiah any more than the people of Nazareth did. And so for them, their unbelief, in effect, has turned Jesus into just another dead prophet.

Another example: If you believe God could never forgive you for something you did, well then, you’re probably right. It’s not that He couldn’t or wouldn’t. It’s that you won’t allow Him. You’re clinging to that sin and saying it is too big and nasty and heavy even for Jesus to atone for on the cross. You are making your sin stronger than Jesus and saying not even His blood can cleanse it. You are rejecting Jesus’ forgiveness and putting limits on Him instead.

If we can do that to the Son of God, think of the influence we have over run of the mill people. If we can undermine Jesus with our low expectations, think what we can do to regular people. Maybe it’s an employee at work

who never quite measures up to your standards, or the man who married your daughter, or the woman who teaches your son, or the person you married. If they're never good enough, if all you do is criticize and never encourage, if they sense you are only their judge, never their advocate or friend, I don't doubt that before long they'll simply stop trying to please you and may even become what you've made them to be.

If we can do that to adults, think of what we can do to little children. If as a child, all you ever hear from your parents or coaches or teachers is, "You're no good at that. You can't do that. You don't have what it takes." In time, that message will practically be encoded in your DNA. "I'm not good at that. I don't have what it takes." If a child grows up hearing time and again that he causes nothing but trouble, it won't be long before he accommodates that view and starts living down to that expectation.

If we can render Jesus effectively powerless by our low expectations, we can do it to an entire race. We've come a long way in terms of racism in America. That's undeniable. But it's not over. I reject some of the things being said about race right now, but racism still exists in America. An example. There's something called micro-aggressions. . . little insults and indignities, for example a person of color being followed around the store to make sure they don't steal anything, or quickening your footsteps to the car if a person of color is behind you. Often, it's not a conscious act. Rarely does someone say, "I'm going to find a way to hurt this person." But it's the woman who secures her purse as a person of color walks by, or someone at the wedding reception assuming the person of color is an employee. None of these is a real big deal by themselves. They're micro. They're small. But they add up.

Imagine if you were walking down the street and every now and then someone lightly punches you in the shoulder. It hurt a little bit, but it wasn't bone crushing. But then it happens again, later. Somebody else gives you a little punch. You don't know why he did, and you don't know who will be punching you next. But it hurts and it makes you wary and angry and sensitive. And there's a cumulative effect, because you're bruised there, and yet you keep getting punched there. Microaggressions are ongoing reminders that a person of color doesn't belong, can't be trusted, and is not worthy of the same respect. And these things do take a toll on self-esteem and confidence and mental health and achievement.

If we can do it to the Son of God, we can do it even to the entire human race. For well over a century, we've been told over and over that we're just animals, not too far removed from our primate cousins. Many have bought into that. They believe it and accommodate it and live down to those expectations and assumptions. If we're just beasts, then it's no wonder we give ourselves over to anger; it's no wonder that guys will try to bed as many women as they possibly can and walk away from any children that are conceived from the hookup. We are living down to the expectations we have placed on ourselves. Compare that with the high standing Psalm 8 gives us, "You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor."

The point is, if we can effectively limit what Jesus will do because of our low expectations of Him, we can do the same to others. But God places the highest expectations on us. "You are the light of the world" Jesus said. Paul wrote, "Live as children of light" (Eph. 5:8). Or from Philippians 2:15, "Be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world." God has the highest expectations of you. But the Good News is He also builds you up and even turns you into who He wants you to be.

For example, in the waters of Holy Baptism you came out different than what you were going in. Going in, you were a child of nature. Coming out . . . a newborn creature. Going in, a sinner. Coming out, now also a saint. Going in, a son or daughter of your parents. Coming out, a child of God.

God has the highest expectation of us and turns us into who He wants us to be. Coming up to the Lord's Supper, filthy with sin, we leave washed clean by the blood of Christ, white as snow.

God turns us into who He wants us to be. "Even though we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:5). By our own choices and behaviors, not his people, but by His grace we are called, redeemed, a people made holy to the Lord.

God turns us into *who* He wants us to be, and *where* He wants us to be. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." So our citizenship is in heaven, because God has made it so.

There is a sense in which we can limit and restrain the Lord our God with our unbelief and low expectations. But in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, He takes off our shackles of sin, unbinds the fetters of death, delivers us from the entanglements of the devil, and frees us for life everlasting in heaven.

With our unbelief, we make Him less than who He is. With His salvation, He makes us so much more than who we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.