

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Mark 6:1-13
SERMON TITLE: A Tough Crowd

An observation born of experience: Hometown folks can be a tough crowd! As many of you know, I was born and raised in Beeville, TX, a town down south, almost midway between San Antonio and Corpus Christi. I was baptized in First Methodist Church as an infant. I was confirmed in that church. I participated in the life of that congregation for eighteen years until I journeyed to the far country of Lubbock, TX, to attend Texas Tech University.

The good people of First United Methodist Church in Beeville, are my extended spiritual family. People like Gladys McClung, Sally Amthor, Dickie Rudeloff, Roddy and Mary Beth Wofford, Pete and Mary Joyce Peterson, and James and Frankie Riggle taught me the Christian faith. These were the adults I looked up to and I thank God for each and every one of them.

Given this history, I think you can imagine my trepidation when my home church offered me my first job on a church staff. That was back in 1976 and I was all of 23 years old. They hired me full-time as the church's program coordinator—and all of a sudden, I was in a position of giving leadership and even teaching the adults who had mentored me all my life.

And for the most part, this worked out just fine—but there were several rough spots. I was troubled, for example, by the racism that I experienced within my home church. If we had the time, I could tell you a few stories. Suffice it to say that for the life of me, I couldn't figure out how racial bigotry had any part in the life of the church—and yet—there it was.

In addition to that, my own readings in the scriptures were leading me in a more radical direction. I began questioning what I saw as our neglect of the poor, our uncritical embrace of affluence, our easy justifications of war and violence. I held this passionate conviction that God was calling us to something more in the church than the status quo.

Well, I'll never forget one particular occasion during which I expressed some of the stirrings in my life on these matters. It was a charge conference meeting in the church parlor. When it came time for me to give my report, I offered a challenge to these people that I had known and loved all of my life.

When I was done with my report, I could tell that people were a little taken aback by what I said. This was not what people expected of me—little Monte Paul—Toots and Nell Marshall's oldest boy.

Several days later, Pete Peterson, one of the pillars of the church, called me down to his office. He was very gentle but firm. He gave me a slap on the hand—metaphorically speaking. He told me that I had overstepped my bounds—that people had been uncomfortable with what I had to say. He was trying to put me in my place.

And it worked. Ever since that time, I've been unduly afraid of taking steps for the sake of the gospel that might alienate me from the people who mean the most to me in my life. So I weigh my words and my actions carefully. I don't want to offend anybody. I know that hometown folks are a tough crowd—I've learned my lesson—so I go along to get along—I stay in my place—because I'm much more concerned with people liking me than with my faithfulness to the gospel. Consequently, I lead a fairly conventional life for a 21st century Christian in America.

And I have no doubt that Jesus would be amazed by my unbelief. You see, I trust God, but only so far. I trust God, but only as long as I stay safe. I trust God, but only until I feel threatened by rejection from the people I care about the most.

But I've paid a price in terms of the gospel. For example, one of the things I hear in this text is a call to follow Jesus so completely and faithfully that my life will actually astound people in the same way that Jesus astounded his hometown crowd.

But then I ask myself: Does my life astound anybody? Do our lives astound anybody? Shouldn't people be saying of us what they said of Jesus? ***Where did they get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to them? What deeds of power are being done by these people!***

Well, if we're ever going to follow Jesus all the way, and be so immersed in the word of God that we too are considered prophets, then we have to be prepared to go without honor among our hometown folks, among our own relatives, and even in our own households. This is the price that Jesus was willing to pay.

If we can't pay this price—if our unbelief gets in the way—then the deeds of power that Christ has in store for me and for you won't be possible—except in some very small measure.

But when the power of Christ combines with a belief unrestrained by our fear of rejection—extraordinary things happen that astound the world. For example: On September 20, 1989, in Pretoria, South Africa, F. W. de Klerk was inaugurated as President of the country. Apartheid, the legal segregation of the races, was the law of the land. de Klerk was Christian who attended church regularly, so he invited his favorite pastor, a white man named Peter Bingle, to lead a worship service as part of the inaugural events.

During the sermon, Pastor Bingle said this: ***Mr. de Klerk, as our new President, God is calling you to do his will. Today God calls you to serve as the President of South Africa. God's commission is not to serve as the President of some people, but as the President of all the people of South Africa.***

By the benediction, de Klerk was weeping. He called his family and friends together and said, *Pray for me. God has told me what I must do. And if I do it, I will be rejected by my own people. Pray for me, that I might do the will of God.* Soon thereafter, de Klerk took steps to release Nelson Mandela from prison. Then he began to negotiate with the African National Congress. Then he worked to dismantle the system of apartheid.¹ The rest, as they say, is history.

Dear brothers and sisters, the hometown folks are a tough crowd, but how long will we let our unbelief, our fear of rejection, keep us from the astounding deeds of power that Christ longs to accomplish in our lives?

¹ As reported by Allister Sparks, "The Secret Revolution," The New Yorker, 11 April, 1994, pp.56-78.