

## How Scandalous!

[Text - Mark 6:1-13]

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I begin this morning with an apology to anyone who saw my sermon title and is eagerly awaiting a juicy story about a crooked politician, a disgraced celebrity, or a disloyal and disappointing local athlete. Sorry, but for that you'll have to check the Internet, or just turn-on the T.V.. The "Scandal" to which my title refers, doesn't involve a notorious figure from today, but rather a renowned individual from 2,000 years ago, who returns to his home town to participate in a worship service. As the guest preacher-of-the-day, Jesus can choose any passage from the Hebrew Scriptures, and give his personal reflections on that reading.

In the expanded telling of this story in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus chooses to read *these* words from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Holy One is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed...." And even though the writer of *Mark* doesn't specifically tell us what passage Jesus reads, it's evident that the passage - and Jesus' comments about it, and about *himself* - are extremely upsetting to his listeners. They ask, "Where did this man get all of this? How did he get to be so wise - or become such a wise guy? Isn't this Mary's boy, the *carpenter* - and aren't those his brothers and sisters standing right there? He's just a local kid from Nazareth; but to hear him talk, you'd think he's the *Messiah!*"

Mark writes that "they took *offense* at him" - which actually loses a bit of its bite in translation. The Greek word Mark uses for "offense" is *skandalon*, from which we get the word, "scandal." It derives from the Greek root-word meaning "snare" or "stumbling-block." And it's obvious that whatever Jesus says to them really trips them up and strikes a nerve! Apparently the hometown crowd just can't believe that one of their own could actually become a great teacher, healer or prophet. And because of the text Jesus chooses, it seems that he's suggesting that he is *more* than a teacher, healer or prophet! "The

Spirit of the Holy One is upon me, because God has *anointed me....*” Jesus appears to be insinuating that *he* is the long awaited Messiah - the Anointed One. But the hometown crowd isn’t buying it.

“Come on, I remember when Jesus was that little kid who used to play with our own kids - skipping stones across the lake [or was *he* skipping across the lake?] Sure, Jesus was a good kid, but he certainly doesn’t measure-up to *our* expectations of who the Messiah will be. Everyone knows the Messiah is going to be an extraordinary, powerful, bigger-than-life figure. So how could the definitive Divine Representative possibly be found in such a common and familiar person? For Jesus to come back here and suggest that he could be the Messiah is deeply offensive and downright scandalous!”

Now, here is the relevant point for you and me to ponder: Many people today are still bothered by those same concerns that the people of Nazareth have. We may be able to envision a Primary Force that initiates the Big Bang. We may accept the idea of a unseen energy that permeates and connects the cosmos. Even a mystical, nebulous spirit may seem plausible to our modern minds. But to believe that the Divine Source of All Existence could be made known to us through some local kid - like Jesus - seems a bit far-fetched. The thing that so deeply offends the people of Nazareth, and what continues to be a stumbling-block for many of us today, is the notion of *Incarnation*: the idea that Divine comes among us in flesh and blood.

The truth is, there are many things about the Christian Faith that really are quite *scandalous* - things that tend to trip us up and cause us to question their validity. For example, we are told to “love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.” [How absurd is *that?*] We are instructed to “turn the other cheek” and to humbly wash one another’s feet! We are even told that, in order to save our lives, we must be willing to let go of them - to give-up our self-centered impulses, for the sake of serving others. The Christian Faith is full of teachings that boggle the mind and bother our sensitivities. And at the very core of our Faith is this story about how the Holy One chooses to be revealed to us through the son of a carpenter from the back-hills of Judea. It disturbs us to think that the Holy One could come among us in such a

common and ordinary way. Nevertheless, the magnificent mystery and majesty of our Faith, is that the Holy One *continues* to connect with us in ways and means that are extremely common and down-to-earth.

It is unsettling to think that the Holy One comes to us through our families and friends - those people who know us best, and who sometimes even know what's best for us [How humbling *that* can be!] It's troubling to acknowledge that Divine Wisdom can speak to us through the voice of a stranger, who may challenge our thinking; or through a strange situation that tests our patience or troubles our conscience. Nevertheless, if you and I are open to it, the Holy One will even speak to us through the lives of those who are poor and hungry, oppressed and hurting, in prison or in immigration detention centers. The scandalous act of the Incarnation reveals that the Source of All Life is willing to reach-out and touch us in ways that are humble and common, fragile and fully human. And while our rational minds may resist this notion, there's something deep within our hearts that recognizes and treasures the truth: that the Divine Spirit moves among us and within us.

The people of Nazareth are unwilling to face the possibility that the Holy Presence could be fully present in the face and voice, the hands and heart of one of their own; therefore Jesus' ability to touch and heal and inspire them is restricted by their own self-imposed limitations. But that's the way in which Jesus understands his role as the Messiah: He will not take the world by force; nor will he force himself upon those who are not yet ready to receive him.

The Good News for today, is that the Holy One doesn't give-up on us, but continues to patiently and steadily reach-out to us with compassionate love and grace - an *infinite* love and grace, that touches us through *finite* forms of family and friends, strangers and strange situations, Bread and Cup, the sharing of food and community, resources and hospitality. As a matter of fact, if you and I are open to it, the Presence of the Holy One will even be recognized in the eyes and face of the kid next-door. And when you and I begin to see that a Holy Presence is within us all, then 'loving our neighbor as we love ourselves' becomes a logical, natural, and integral part of who we are.