

How Will Jesus Astound Us

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9 [b]

July 8, 2018

Mark 6:1-13

¹ [Jesus] went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ² And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? ³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. ⁴ And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.” ⁵ And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. ⁶ And he marveled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷ And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts—⁹ but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. ¹⁰ And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. ¹¹ And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. ¹³ And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

In the Name of Jesus.

Jesus teaches in a synagogue—a normal thing for a rabbi to do—and those who hear him are astonished.

Why? They had heard accomplished speakers before, nothing astonishing about that. They had heard the teachers of the Law set down instructions for living a clean and effective life—they were used to that; it didn't astonish them. They had heard the Pharisees quote the Bible verses which served their purpose of establishing rules and principles for how you should live your life and give your tithes so that God would reward you. That's old hat. It astonishes no one.

They had at times gone up to Jerusalem to see the Sadducees in the Temple, as these Sadducees wore their fancy robes and ornate belts and hats and spoke of successful earthly lives. They had ceased to be astonished at the show.

But now a man from Nazareth, wearing no impressive gown, with no motivational speeches of Law, no blustering with cherry-picked Bible verses—a simple man from Nazareth comes into town and teaches. And all are astonished.

How does Jesus astonish?

Here's what people are used to, what everyone grows up with, what they hear at every corner of their life, so that in its familiarity and predictability, it astonishes no one.

People are used to being told better ways to live. People grow up with hearing pathways to success and victorious living. People, at every corner of their life, can be seduced with talks promising improvement and changed lives but which end up with just more old-hat manipulation and control.

They had the scribes and teachers of the Law for that, the Pharisees and Sadducees, and we, in our own generation, are seduced by the same teachings and promises, and it astonishes no one.

But here's what people are not used to, what is so outside of predictability and so against expectations, that it astonishes: A man teaching people with a doctrine not of how to please God, but of how God has mercy on sinners; a doctrine not that manipulates and imposes control, but gives freedom and dispenses gifts. A doctrine that reveals a Savior who saves you not because he is an example for you to mimic, but saves you because he willingly sheds blood to atone for your sin and cleanse your conscience.

Jesus astonishes.

They have never heard anything like this before. Actually, they had heard it—had they been listening.

It had been spoken to them from the Gospel promise given to Abraham, a promise by which Abraham had faith and was justified. It was spoken to them in the promise to Moses, by which the Israelites were cleansed of all sin by the gift of the blood of the sacrifice at the Tabernacle. It was given to them in the promise to King David that from his lineage would be a Christ who would cleanse sinners.

They heard it in the promise given through Isaiah that the Virgin would bear a Son and her Son would bear our griefs and carry our sorrows.

They had heard this Gospel before in times past and in many and various ways from the prophets.
[Hebrews 1]

They had heard the doctrine of God coming among sinners to cleanse and give gifts. But this doctrine of grace, this word of the sinner's justification, is twisted and perverted by the teachers of the Law so that it's no longer a dispensing of gifts. As a teaching of the Law, it's contorted into a preaching of demand of what the sinner must do. It's mangled to be no longer the cleansing of the conscience by the mercy of God, but a binding of the conscience by the constriction of the Law.

So, Jesus astonishes.

Mark 1:22:

On the Sabbath [Jesus] entered the synagogue and was teaching. ²² And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.

Jesus taught not as a scribe counting up sins, but as one forgiving sins.

Mark 7:37:

³⁷ And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, " He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Jesus sees a person who can't speak, or one who is deaf, and he teaches not as the Pharisees, who taught that if you are deaf or mute, it is because you have sinned, but Jesus teaches as one who wants to heal the deaf ears and restore the mute mouth, and who wants always to cleanse the sinner.

Mark 11:18:

And the chief priests and the scribes heard [what Jesus said] and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.

Where the chief priests and scribes wanted to keep people under their control by the binding of the Law,

Jesus was freeing people from their guilt, he was setting at liberty all those covered in shame, he was cleansing consciences and replacing fear with joy.

Jesus astonishes us.

He teaches that which is unexpected by the sinner, which is outside any prediction made under the rule of retribution, and which is totally surprising to those living under the Law. Living under the Law—that is every sinner, it is us.

And Jesus comes to us in his Word to astonish, by breaking us free from whatever modern-day Pharisees, scribes, or teachers of the Law we may have heard a false Gospel form—and that includes us—we ourselves wherever we have tried to make ourselves worthy of God by changing our lives by the way we live under the Law.

Where we are bound in guilt, Jesus speaks forgiveness. Where we are covered in shame—the shame of our own sin and also the shame of the world we live in, Jesus speaks honor of us before his Father by virtue of his own blood. Where our consciences are stained by unclean memories and by the demons, Jesus speaks a Word declaring us to be justified before his Father, bringing peace and health to our consciences.

Jesus astonishes.

He binds himself to sinners, he eats with them and drinks wine with them. He desires to be with every sinner to speak forgiveness, to teach grace, and to comfort with the Gospel which creates a heart of faith.

He calls sinners to himself. He knows we are sinners, even better than we ourselves do. But he gives us his Name, and instead of disparaging these lives we live in our flesh, he honors them, coming to us in his Body and Blood to forgive our sin, to bind us to himself and to one another.

And that, too, is astonishing. For in binding us to one another, he gives us to see something else which makes no sense under the Law.

He sets us to do the most astonishing thing toward one another. Where we have been sinned against, and under the Law have every right of retribution, he gives us to, instead, to speak forgiveness and restore the sinner. Where we see a brother or sister living in shame, he gives us to honor them with our friendship and speak forgiveness and cleansing to them, even as he spoke cleansing to the sinners and those afflicted by the demons. Where we ourselves are troubled with sin and shame, he gives us to turn to a brother or sister and ask for our Lord's Word of mercy and grace and encouragement.

Where we are tempted to look to our own progress for worthiness before God, he turns us to himself to see that we belong to the Father not by any work of our own, not any progress or changed lives we may try to claim, but purely and completely because, in his grace, Jesus has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. Not our work of the Law, but his pure gift of the Gospel.

In the Name of Jesus.