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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
7th Sunday after Pentecost/Year B/Proper 9
July 8, 2018
Text: Mark 6:1-13

“What If God Were One of Us?”

In 1995, singer Joan Osborne presented the music world a song that became a Top 40 hit later that year and was nominated for three Grammy Awards. It has since been sung by various artists and is a familiar track on both television and movie screens. The song? ‘One of Us’. Its lyrics say in part:

*If God had a name, what would it be?
And would you call it to His face?
If you were faced with Him in all His glory
What would you ask if you had just one question?*

*And yeah, yeah God is great
Yeah, yeah, God is good
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah*

*What if God was one of us
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make His way home?**

Perhaps one reason why this song has endured and endeared itself to the sensibilities of both secular and Christian audiences has nothing to do with its beat but with its lyrics-lyrics that may cause us to imagine ourselves in the very company of Jesus. How cool it would have been to actually be someone in first century Palestine to encounter Jesus of Nazareth, to see him face to face, to hear him speak. What would it have been like to be part of the crowds that followed him? Or would we have followed him at all?

There is an old adage which goes, “familiarity breeds contempt.”

In today’s Gospel Jesus has come home to Nazareth. He has been on the road of late. You see, he didn’t just rearrange his shop and put a sign on the door

that said “Open for Business” and expect people to come him. Rather, he went to them, meeting people where they were; in towns, villages and synagogues, along roads and sea shores and hillsides-all the while proclaiming God’s kingdom. He has built a cadre of disciples. He has dined with tax collectors and sinners. He has welcomed the stranger and when he encountered anyone who was sick, blind, deaf or crippled, he healed them. Even those possessed by demons. He has even raised the dead! He has built quite the reputation.

On this particular day, Jesus went into the synagogue of his boyhood and began to preach. Mark does not tell us what Jesus said that day but his words must have been powerful. At first, the response from the community is astonishment and curiosity. But before anyone knew it-things began to go south! People began to whisper. They know this guy. This was the village that raised him, his brothers and sisters too. And they said, “*Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!*” Isn’t this Jesus the carpenter? What does he know? Didn’t he make a table for the neighbor two doors down from Sarah? Isn’t this Mary’s boy? Hey, Mister Big Stuff! Who do you think you are? And Mark says that “*they took offense at him.*” He was just one of “them”.

Jesus sensed the change in the air. Contempt. Jealousy. Judgment, perhaps? With a mixture of sadness and disappointment he said to them, “*Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, among their own kind, and in their own house.*” And Mark tells us that Jesus, who had recently calmed the sea and healed a woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years, and raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead, could do no deed of power among his own people, except to heal a few who were sick.

I would suppose that Jesus could have put the townspeople in their places. He could have said, ‘I’ll show you who am I alright.’ After all, he was the Son of God. But nowhere in the gospels does Jesus brag on who he really is. Even as Jesus exorcised demons in Mark’s gospel he told them to be quiet.

The sad thing about this story is that the townspeople’s contempt diminished Jesus’ ability to do wonders on their behalf. Their small-mindedness, lack of faith, and their inability to embrace the person Jesus had become kept them from untold blessings.

How often in our lives do we do this? Are we, in a sense, our own Nazareth? We have our own perceptions of others, don’t we? How often have we

turned a blind eye or turned someone away because of who they look like or dress like or because of what they believe? *‘They couldn’t possibly belong here. They couldn’t possibly afford to own a certain car. They couldn’t possibly be living in my neighborhood. They couldn’t possibly attain almost a million dollars’ worth of college scholarships.’* And on and on. The news has reported far too many situations like these especially of late. We set limits on others and for ourselves and in doing so we limit ourselves. Are there opportunities and blessings missed because we box others in? Sometimes even setting limits for God?

The townsfolk sure set a limit on Jesus but the rejection he received at home did not define him. The limits to which his own people wanted to confine him did not hold him back from doing God’s work. Instead, Jesus shook off the dust of Nazareth and resumed his ministry, teaching and healing, and as he did, he commissioned twelve of his closest disciples to share in his ministry sending them out two by two. Like Jesus, they traveled and proclaimed repentance, healed people from their sickness, cast out unclean spirits and preached about the kingdom of God.

My friends, Jesus’ directives have not changed. As baptized Christians we are among so many who follow the line of those disciples who traveled with him and continued to do so after his death, resurrection, and ascension.

And you and I, and other ordinary and everyday folks, are commissioned to be extensions of the Holy One who showed compassion and loved the other fiercely and bids us all to do the same. God can use us. We are but a part of the community of Jesus’ love, commissioned to go out into the world, a world sorely in need of healing and renewal, to bear witness to God’s forgiveness, abounding and steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness, and acceptance. We are to mirror those very attributes of God to EVERYONE we meet. And remember that when we look at the face of another we are actually looking into the very face of God. *And when we least expect it, they might very well be the same precious gift to us!*

Just only yesterday I saw a wonderful cartoon of Jesus holding a mirror and in the mirror he sees himself-not as a bearded man but the mirror showed-black, white, Asian, man, woman, child, and on and on...

Yes, Jesus, *God, was one of us*, who came to model for us the image and likeness of God, the life and love of God, and to show us what the kingdom of God looks like in the unexpected places and persons we meet.

What if God was one of us, the song asks...

God does have a face. What might it look like? Does it look like the carpenter's son? Mary's boy?

Or maybe that slob. That stranger on a bus trying to make his way home (as the song suggests).

Or maybe God's face looks like that person working two jobs just to make ends meet. The black teenager with a 4.9 GPA. The little girl who collects books so that her friends might learn to love to read. A mother, a father who live in a neighborhood we would rather not go. The immigrant seeking refuge. The person next door. The lady who sat on the stone bench outside our front door this morning. Like you and me.

God always has a way of surprising us. "Jesus was not the only one God sent to shake us up. God is always sending us people to disturb us-to wake us up, to yank our chains, to set us on fire-because about the worst thing that can happen to us, religiously speaking, is for us to hold perfectly still without changing a thing until we turn into fossils."**

What if God was one of us? Let's not let God's blessings pass us by.
Amen!

* *'One of us'* written by Eric Bazilian of the Hooters

** *"Sapping God's Strength"*, a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor from Bread of Angels