

Reflection for 4-5 July 2015
14th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
Mike Britton

Text: Ezekiel 2:3-5; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6.

There's a term for what the people of Nazareth did to Jesus, isn't there? We use it most often in the context of career, but it can apply in other areas of life just as well. When someone dismisses us as being limited to our past or current role, lacking the potential to achieve something new, we say that we've been "pigeonholed", and that's exactly what the Nazarenes did to the carpenter's son they all thought they knew.

I know it has happened to me, and I didn't like it one bit, when I eventually became aware of it. It's often not expressed as openly as it was two thousand years ago, not least because here and now, we claim to recognize the importance of agency and self-determination. You've probably each been victims of it at some point. We can each be deemed too young or too old, too gay or bi or "undecided", too lazy, too black, too foreign, too female, too transgender, too blind or deaf or mobility-impaired, too feminine or masculine, too uneducated, too poor, too shy, too pushy, too *something* to get that job or promotion, to be trusted as a leader, to become a star, to make a difference, to amount to much, to be worth loving.

This kind of prejudice—pre-judgment—attacks our agency. I'm a pretty confident guy, but if I'm given a consistent message that I won't measure up, I start to doubt myself, and to believe that constraint. It's a lot safer to believe in a limitation than in a capability, because whatever my potential, I'm pretty sure I can live down to any limitation I accept and so "prove" myself and others right. We get suckered into pigeonholing ourselves.

I've been on the flip side of this too, as I think many of us have: I've made up my mind about people and treated my assumptions as more real than the people themselves. As with most bad habits, a bit of mindfulness can go a long way toward remedying this. You and I can examine our thoughts about people, recognize our snap judgments, and maybe let go and open ourselves to seeing them as we all are: works in progress, intended for and fully capable of ultimate union with God. We can support, rather than impede, each other in our journey toward that union.

Jesus hit a wall in Nazareth, and found that because almost nobody believed in him, he could do almost nothing. At first glance, this looks like a great example of that self-limitation, where his capability is limited by his own willingness to accept the townsfolk's view, prevalent in pretty much all the world at that time, that having been born a carpenter, a carpenter he must stay. Jesus, though, clearly wasn't buying it, and rebuked them; why, then, could he do no great works?

The answer, I think, lies in the fact that Jesus' miracles were not merely his own independent initiatives, but were manifestations of shared intent between God and person. Jesus is the incarnation of God's Word and will, and so miracles happen "Through him, with him, and in him," as we proclaim at the Eucharist. Last week, we heard how a woman who touched Jesus' clothes in the hope of healing was cured, and Jesus said to her, "'Daughter, your faith has healed you.'"¹ Today, we are reminded that the converse can be true too: lack of faith can prevent us from being healed.

The people of Nazareth weren't just pigeonholing Jesus: they were pigeonholing God. God's magnitude is uncomfortable, because it is beyond our comprehension; far easier to worship an image of a tamer god that fits into our worldview and doesn't challenge us. We are all Nazarenes sometimes, failing to see and hear because we have set in our minds that God will come to us only in this way or that. As Ezekiel discovered, God's Word will find a way to be heard, even if from surprising quarters. As Jesus said on another occasion, "'With humankind this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.'"²

Before I conclude, I want to examine Paul's situation and relate it to this notion of pigeonholes—fit it in, perhaps. If we hold to a rigid ideal model of people and dismiss those who don't fit it, we may also glorify others who do, and may even count ourselves in that elite group. Paul may have recognized a risk of this in himself, and come to recognize the "thorn" as a reminder that we are not divided between weak and strong, worthy and unworthy, but that we are all—even Apostles—imperfect people drawn together and offered a path toward God through Jesus.

Many years ago, Fr. Chris Rushton concluded a homily here with the simple message, "Never discourage." I want to reiterate that today. There is nothing you or I or anyone you will ever meet cannot do, if it be done with God. Let's learn to see the world and each other with open eyes, so that we can find God in the most unexpected places. Even the blind can see like this, with God's limitless and transforming love.

¹ Mark 5:34

² Mark 10:27