

Marquand Chapel
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Offense Intended

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Mark 6:3-4

You'll forgive me for saying so, but Mark is one lumpy gospel. It doesn't have Matthew's balance of Old and New covenants, it lacks the elegant language and social consciousness of Luke, and it doesn't seem much concerned with the transcendent visions of John.

Mark is a story-teller, to be sure, but his story is told in staccato style, like a series of speed bumps. The more I'm exposed to Mark, the more I'm convinced that if his gospel were put to music, it would be a ballad...badly sung...probably by Bob Dylan. You know what I mean – off-key, jarring, certainly not what you'd describe as an angelic voice. If put to music, Mark would take more than a few listens to catch the lyrics and the drift of what's being said. That's how I hear the gospel of Mark.

But if you're patient enough, Mark, like Dylan's music, just might get under your skin. What it lacks in elegance, it makes up for in vividness – little bursts of surprising images or phrases that catch you up short...that really seize your attention. If you're not put off but the abruptness and roughness of these nuggets, they can capture the mind, and the spirit.

Today's Gospel lesson is a great example of this. We've all seen how much content Mark packs into – you might say, conceals – in just a few verses. The richness of the lectionary passage is incredible, and could take the reader or the preacher in a dozen different directions, at least. Perhaps one of the best traveled preacherly paths from this passage is Jesus' observation that "prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown." There's so much to be said about that insight, both for Jesus' own time and for ours.

But I don't even make it to the fourth verse. Where Mark rivets and holds my attention is immediately before that: "And they" – Jesus' neighbors in Nazareth – "took offense at him."

Offense, at Jesus?! A moment earlier Mark is telling us that the crowds at the synagogue in Nazareth are "astounded" at his teaching. In fact, the opening of the scene is almost an exact replica of Jesus' teaching at the synagogue in Capernaum, which Mark relates in the first chapter, and where Jesus performs his first miracle. And there the synagogue-goers' reaction is sustained astonishment, marveling over what they've witnessed. But now Jesus' listeners in Nazareth take offense. What's with that?

The downsides of familiarity, perhaps? In Capernaum the synagogue crowds are most impressed with Jesus, the new face on the scene. But in Nazareth, where they know

Jesus as the carpenter's son, it's hard to credit that he now speaks authoritatively on things as vital as God and Torah. You can just hear them murmuring: what nerve this carpenter's son has!

And that interpretation fits in nicely with Jesus' following remark about a prophet not being accepted on his home turf. But it still leaves unanswered: what are we to make of the "offense" Jesus caused? Presumably, it wasn't something in his appearance that offended.

It had to be in what Jesus was teaching. And we can only assume Jesus' teaching hadn't changed all that much since he began his preaching tour of Galilee. If anything, you might think that his message was improving with practice. So should we conclude that Jesus just ran into a major case of hometown pettiness?

Maybe. But we also know from Mark's account – the second and third chapters, in particular – that Jesus had been ticking off certain people with regularity well before he reached his hometown. And with just a glance at the Greek text, we learn that Mark is fond of a word – *skandalidzo* – that is a close relative to our own word, scandal. Both terms convey a sense of affront and indignation, that is, of "taking offense." And just to keep things interesting the NRSV gives us an alternative meaning for "*skandalidzo*," namely, "stumbling over," which I'll return to in a moment.

So, by Mark's testimony, whatever Jesus is saying in Galilee is astonishing his listeners, scandalizing them, or both. Now we would have no reason to dwell on this if this sort of response to Jesus came from a few envious hometown yahoos, or from the Pharisees and scribes. The latter have expressed their indignation over Jesus many times. So, maybe we can safely confine those offended by Jesus to a relatively small group.

And by focusing on the small-mindedness of Jesus' fellow Nazarenes and the Temple authorities, we just might be able to forget how much Jesus' gospel offends us.

Do you want me to repeat that? I said how much Jesus' gospel offends us. Now you might be thinking -- How can this guy up in the pulpit possibly know what offends me? Fair enough, I'll start with what offends me about Jesus. I don't like one bit Jesus' treatment of the Canaanite woman, for openers. You know the story I mean – where Jesus responds to the woman's plea for help with a contemptuous remark about "throwing scraps to a dog."

You've heard explanations of that outrage? So have I...some even sound plausible. Then how about this: I'm not too fond of Jesus' implied threat of violence, when he talks about not coming to bring peace to the earth, but a sword. Especially at a time when our own country is struggling with an increasingly unpopular and divisive war, I don't care for Jesus' militaristic tone at all.

Still not offended? Well, how about this offensive barrage, a real backhand slap at family values if ever there was one. It's a remark reported in two of the gospels, but expressed with special ferocity in the 14th chapter of Luke (v.26): "Whoever comes to

me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

I could go on. I could cite a bunch more examples that would reinforce the impression that the Messiah and his message have an edge that isn't at all in keeping with conventional views of Jesus. You know what I mean – where Jesus has been nicely domesticated into a benign, gentle, “happy news” sage.

But the fact is that the Gospels fairly bristle with such offenses. And each of these incidents or outbursts has been inspiration for countless commentaries and interpretations. But one of the few attempts I've seen to treat these incendiary remarks as a class comes from David McCrackin, who has written a book entitled “The Scandals of the Gospel.” McCrackin's thesis is that the offensive remarks Jesus uttered in his preaching and teaching should not – primarily -- be analyzed, interpreted, and explained away. Rather, they should simply be listened to, and absorbed. As McCrackin puts it, “the possibility of offense ought to be an essential part of a reader's encounter with the Gospel.”

Now that's counterintuitive thinking, the sort you might expect when the goal is to prod the “respectable, ordinary world” to accept something truly extraordinary.

This brings me back to that second meaning of “skandalidzo” as “stumbling block.” You see, McCrackin thinks the provocations of the Gospel are quite deliberate, resulting in one of two responses: they can take the predictable course of triggering indignation and anger in the reader or listener. And with the ensuing rush of blood to one's head, the one so provoked is blinded and deafened to any real thought or insight.

Or these verbal assaults can – through their sheer provocative power – stimulate a searing, probing search of yours and my own notions about the Gospel message and the spiritual dilemmas it portrays. This latter course is by far the bumpier one, and far less satisfying in the short run. It's full of stops and starts, sudden advances and abrupt halts - - sort of like Mark's gospel. But in McCrackin's view, and I think in Mark's, this is the pathway of discipleship.

What commends McCrackin's approach to me is that he doesn't try to dilute the acid edge of these sayings, doesn't try, to use another image, to lance the boil. He leaves the wound there, an affront to our sensibilities and our presumptions, and calls us to recognize ourselves, our world, and our Savior.

By last Friday, I thought I had safely put this sermon to bed. On to the next assignment. But while scanning a news website Friday night this headline caught my eye: “Was Jesus an enemy of religion?”

I thought to myself – don't even click the link...but I couldn't resist the temptation. And I came to a review of a new book by Garry Wills, whose output includes a number of books on Catholicism and his own life of faith. This is the book: What Jesus Meant. I

haven't finished reading it, but there was something in the foreword that resonated with the message I've tried to offer this morning.

Wills writes: "To read the gospels in the spirit with which they were written, it is not enough to ask what Jesus did or said. We must ask what Jesus meant by his strange deeds and words. He intended to reveal the Father to us, and to show that he is the only-begotten Son of the Father. What he signified is always more challenging than we expect, more outrageous, more egregious."

I think this is advice well worth considering, especially those of us who propose to step into the pulpit on a regular basis, or who expect to teach the gospels in seminaries and universities.

But this is good advice for general application as well. Because if we learn to read the Gospel in the manner both McCrackin and Wills recommend, we just might be better prepared to handle the infinite offenses we confront outside the Gospel. We just might find ourselves better equipped to meet outrage with determined calm, to call out others' failings while keeping our own in full view, to separate real from imagined provocations and to use both as opportunities for witness and service.

Annie Dillard, in her book, *Teaching a Stone To Talk* (that's a great title for a preaching course, don't you think?), gives us a picture of what she imagines could replace the placid, complacent faith that she says afflicts so many churches. She talks about a rough-and-tumble, volatile Christianity, where the ushers at the entrance to the sanctuary hand out crash helmets and life preservers and then come by to lash down parishioners in the pews. She says this survival gear is necessary because we don't realize what we're tinkering with when we invoke the Gospel. As she puts it, "...the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

Crash helmets, life preservers, lashing to the pews. Now there's a church that's been provoked, that's been offended. So go forth this morning and, to paraphrase Martin Luther, offend boldly, and in so doing rediscover the path to Christ.