

July 5, 2009

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 6:1-13

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Many summers ago just before I entered my teenage years, I spent a week with my Aunt at her camp in Maine. My cousin David was there too, visiting from college. For the most part we passed our days swimming in the cold lake and floating on the dock reading books. A couple times we took the canoe out to explore, but it was mainly a lazy hazy week. I don't remember quite how it happened, but at some point during the week I found out that David could juggle and I begged him to teach me how. So whenever we were not outside enjoying our beautiful surroundings, you would find me standing in front of a wall first with one koosh-ball in my hand as I tossed it back and forth, and back and forth; once I mastered that then there were two koosh balls, finally I bravely tried three. By standing in front of the wall, it helped me to control my wild throws and prevent the ball from going out of reach. David patiently guided me every step of the way until I had mastered tossing three balls. My Aunt joined in the fun, and in the evening as all of us practiced our juggling if anyone glanced in our cottage window, we probably looked to them like some family from a traveling circus.

I haven't seen David very much since that week in Maine – I went to the West Coast for his wedding, he came to the East Coast for my wedding, Scott and I visited him and his family while they were living in Barcelona, but we have kept in touch through the wonders of the internet and e-mail.

David was visiting my parents this past week and my Dad relayed a conversation they had: David said, "I know that Elizabeth is married, I know that she's a mother, I know she has been ordained a priest, but I still think of her as that 12 year old girl in Maine who I taught how to juggle." I smiled when I heard this, but there was a large part of me that was also groaning, "Uhhhh! Are you kidding me?"

It is challenging to know and be known by someone. I am sure you each have your own similar story of how someone who has known you, has intentionally or unintentionally kept you in the box of who they first knew you as and now can not see the fullness of who you have become.

In today's gospel, Jesus returns to his hometown to observe the Sabbath among people whom he knows and trusts. He doesn't heal the multitudes as he has been doing elsewhere, but when faced with suffering he heals the few who come to him. But his ministry among them is severely limited. Even though he is among his own people, their response is to doubt him. They close themselves off from his teachings, and dismiss him. This town already knows Jesus. They have known him since he was a little boy, they know all the facts about him. They knew him as merely the son of a carpenter. They perhaps remember some rumors about his conception before Mary and Joseph were married. They know that he did not have the means nor the societal stature to receive formal rabbinical training. They remember that he took on his father's occupation as a carpenter. The folks in the town know Jesus; at least they know facts about who he was, but they missed Jesus altogether. Maybe because they already have those prior relationships with Jesus, that prior knowledge of who he was and where he fit in their social order, maybe because they are clinging so tightly to his bio, the facts about who he was, that this causes them to remain closed-off from who he has become unwilling to receive what he has to offer and they turn their backs on the opportunity to enter into renewed relationship with Jesus. Debbie Royals, in a sermon she preaches on this text, describes the hometown villagers as being so "busy making their assumptions and judgments that they miss the most essential part – opening themselves to that which could bring them closer to God."

The disciples and the crowd that follow Jesus know this man as more than his station in society as a carpenter. The disciples know him as the one who recognized something in them and commissioned them to the ministry of discipleship. He is their wise rabbi and teacher, who has taught them about what is of ultimate worth through the telling of parables. They have been present as he has cured and healed many who were sick. Time and again he has demonstrated his power over nature in the calming of the wind when they were in the boat, his power over sickness and even death, as we heard last week in the story about the hemorrhaging woman and the young girl who had died.

The disciples and crowds know and have experienced some of the immensity of God's love as expressed through the person and ministry of Jesus. And yet, even now, they don't know the entirety of who Jesus is. They haven't yet experienced the arrest, the trial, and the death of Jesus on the cross. They don't know the depth of God's love for us. They have yet to experience Jesus' ultimate sacrifice to conquer evil and death. They have not yet encountered the miracle of the risen Christ or his enduring gift of the Holy Spirit. There is so much yet for them to know and experience about God, but in order for that to happen, they must remain open and engaged in their relationship with Jesus. They can't just close themselves off at this point on the journey and say, "Oh we know who Jesus is: he is a miraculous healer and rabbi, he can control the wind and waves. He is a dynamic teacher who speaks with authority and challenges the synagogue officials." If the disciples and the crowds were to close themselves off now, they would miss-out on the depth and immensity of who Jesus is. They would miss seeing how time and again he remains faithful to God. They would miss out on experiencing how Jesus ignores societal boundaries and norms, and instead responds with compassion and love to stranger and friend. They would be limited in describing Jesus with words like teacher

and healer, miracle worker; they would miss experiencing Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, Emmanuel: God with us.

Today we are reminded of how easily we too can fall into the patterns of the people in Jesus' hometown. It so easy to say, "We know God; we know who God has been in our lives and how we have experienced God." We each have our own descriptor words that we use when talking about God, words that describes what we have experienced of God's love. Perhaps your faith in God has helped you to work through a time of meaningful reconciliation and so your primary descriptor may be reconciling God. Or perhaps you are a cradle Christian and your earliest remembrances about God are learning the song "Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong, they are weak but He is strong." It is all too easy and probably very human for us to say yes we know God and remain there in that singular image of God. Check it off that's done. But, if we remain in those small initial glimpses into God, and then place God in that tiny box and say, oh we know who God is: God is strong when I am weak or God is the one who reconciles what is broken in the world, then we might hear the villagers of Jesus' hometown whispering in our ears saying, "Who is Jesus? He is just a carpenter." If we just stay there in that one experience of God, then our relationship with God can become stale and stagnant. We have shut ourselves off from knowing the fullness of who God is. We haven't allowed ourselves the room to open-up and truly know God. We haven't let ourselves to be truly vulnerable in that knowing. There are many, many ways that God is speaking to us, even now. God continues to be present and act in peoples lives, but we must be ready to listen and respond. God draws us into community for a reason, so that we share the journey with one another and share our truths with one another. As we share our stories and our understanding of who God is, we all grow in our knowledge of God and come to experience God in new ways.

When I came here to All Saints', Geoffrey talked in his sermons, in adult education sessions, and in his presentations at GIFT about the freedom that comes from experiencing God's love. That the experience of God's abundant love for us frees us from anxiety, frees us to respond to this broken world we live in with acts and attitudes of generosity and love. For me that was a new way of describing God's love for us and our response to it. It was something new to look toward in my prayer life and in my life of faith to open myself to experiencing God's love in that way. It has opened for me another piece that has allowed me to know more of who God is and given me new words to describe how God's love affects me, my heart and my actions. We each have our own ways of speaking to the truth of God's love for us. We have our own stories to share about who God is and how God has acted in our lives. If we keep these close to our chest and don't talk about them with others, it not only keeps us within that box of our limited experience of God, but it also affects the whole community, as we keep others from knowing God as we have known God, it keeps that box tight instead of releasing that knowing of God so that all of our hearts can be affected.

This week we begin the Episcopal Church's General Convention in Anaheim, CA. This will be for us another opportunity to experience God at work in the world. Throughout Convention there will be numerous opportunities to hear stories about how God has transformed individuals and communities, through acts of justice, love, and

compassion. If the folks at convention allow themselves to be open and receive these various expressions of who God is and how God continues to transform lives, perhaps we might experience God in action with those gathered at Convention as they work together to carry out the mission and ministry of the church.

It is challenging to know God, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable to that knowing. We have a slight advantage over the crowds and the disciples. We do know the entire story of Jesus: we know of all his healing and teaching, and we also know of his faithful obedience to God all the way to his horrific death on the cross. We know that death has been conquered, that Jesus was resurrected and ascended into heaven, and we now share in the gift of the Holy Spirit. But there is still more that is yet to be known about who God is. But we must open our eyes and our ears and our hearts so that we will hear with hearts and see with our eyes how is God acting in the world in new ways.

If we don't and instead keep our eyes and our hearts tightly shut, then we, like the people in Jesus' hometown, will miss the living God standing right before us offering us God's love, God's grace and forgiveness, healing and strength, reconciliation and freedom from anxiety. God's love for us is abundant and never-ending. There are infinite ways that God expresses that love to us, but we must work to remain open and listen so that we can continue receive God's grace and love and in grateful response share it freely with the world.