

TAKING OFFENSE

[Jesus] left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. 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! 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.

Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Mark 6: 1-6

About 40 years ago, Garrison Keillor published "The Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra"—his thoughts on selecting the most appropriate instrument for a good Christian to play. But even before thinking about which instrument to play, Keillor sets the tone of the piece. He writes:

"To each person God gives some talent, such as writing, just to name one, and to many persons [God] has given musical talent, though not as many as think so. For the young Lutheran, the question must be: Do I have a genuine God-given musical talent, or do I only seem gifted in comparison with other Lutherans?"

He continues:

"If your talent is choir or organ, there's no problem. Choir members and organists can be sure their gift is from God because who else but God would be interested. Just like nobody gets fat on celery, nobody goes into church music for the wrong motives."

And then, after dismissing a most of the brass and woodwinds as inappropriate, he turns to the strings. "The violin," he suggests, "is a problem for any Christian because it's a solo instrument, a virtuoso instrument, and we're not solo people. We believe in taking a back seat and being helpful." (*We Are Still Married*, pp. 30-32)

Keillor's reflections on musical talent and orchestra instruments faithfully reflects the ethos of his fictional hometown, Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. Wobegonians are uncomfortable in the spotlight and suspicious of individual success and achievements. They are reminded over and over again, from parents to scout leaders to music teachers—"You're no better than anyone else, so don't get too big for your britches." One of the most frequent questions they hear is, "Just who do you think you are?"

Having just completed a tour of the cities and villages around the Sea of Galilee where he preached and taught to large crowds, where he healed the sick, cast demons out of those possessed, and even raised the dead child of the leader of the synagogue, Jesus comes back home to Nazareth with his disciples. He begins to teach in his home synagogue and the people there are amazed—at first. But then they start asking questions.

Mark's gospel is full of questions. Sometimes the questions are raised by those who approach Jesus, sometimes they are raised by Jesus to start a conversation or as a teaching tool. One question that is repeated throughout the gospel narrative is "Who is this?" In the story of Jesus calming the storm on the sea we considered a couple of weeks ago, you can't help but notice the awe and even fear of the disciples as they asked, "Who is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?" And the questions raised by the home-town folks of Nazareth start out in a similar tone. "Where did this man get this kind of wisdom and this kind of power?" they ask in amazement. "Who is this?"

But then, just about the time you might think that a celebration is about to break out, a "local boy makes good" kind of homecoming, the mood shifts. It is not stated just why his hometown booster

club suddenly turns on him, but the questioning quickly turns from “Who is this?” to “Just who do you think you are?”

And this goes beyond the kind of small town resentment or repression you might expect in Lake Wobegon. The text says, they took offense at him. Actually, the Greek word Mark uses here is *skandalizo*—they were *scandalized* by Jesus.

Now those of us who come to this text from the perspective of a life-long Christian faith may find it hard to understand how anyone could take offense at Jesus, that cute baby in the manger that the shepherds and the wise men found so adorable. Who would be offended by Jesus, that first-century equivalent of the ‘60s flower child who went around spreading peace and love? Jesus is our Savior who died for our sins. How could anyone be scandalized by Jesus?

But the real irony of this story is that the people of Nazareth were *right* to take offense. What I want to suggest is that Jesus is a scandal-monger and when it is really heard, the gospel he came to preach and to embody is an offensive gospel.

The scandal surrounding Jesus actually started before he was even born. When King Herod heard about him from those wise men from the east, he was scandalized. And again, he was right to take offense. He astutely understood that the coming of this Messiah would mean a radical change to the way things were and would throw the power arrangements of the Herod’s of this world into serious question.

The coming of Jesus is presented as the beginning of a new age, and as Walter Brueggemann has noted “that announcement carries within it a harsh criticism of all those powers and agents of the present order. His message was to the poor, but others kept them poor and benefited from their poverty. He addressed the captives . . . but others surely wanted that arrangement unchanged. He named the oppressed, but there are never oppressed without oppressors.” (*Prophetic Imagination*, p. 84)

When Jesus ate with sinners and tax-collectors and social outcasts, he offended the traditional morality and class boundaries of society. When he associated with women in public and validated their lives and their faith, he scandalized gender boundaries. And when he was seen carrying on an extended conversation with a Samaritan woman in broad daylight at a public meeting place—well, he offended and scandalized so many barriers and taboos that it is hard to keep up with them all.

And as hard as it may be to imagine, even the compassion of Jesus, perhaps the quality for which he is best remembered, even the compassion of Jesus was a scandal. Again, Walter Brueggemann articulates this well when he says that the compassion of Jesus was more than just a “personal emotional reaction” to the pain and suffering and indignation that he encountered among the poor and those who had been cast aside by society. The compassion of Jesus is offensive to us, he says, because it is a radical form of criticism of the systems and forces and ideologies that produce and sustain the suffering and poverty and deny dignity to those who are powerless. (*Prophetic Imagination*, pp. 88-94)

The gospel of Jesus Christ, if it is rightly heard and understood, is a scandal, and it still proves to be offensive to us—or, at least, it should. Whenever money or political power becomes more important than the well-being and health of people, we should be offended by the gospel. Whenever maintaining the power of the institutional church or the integrity of a denomination takes precedence over doing the right thing toward those who have been effectively ostracized from service and leadership roles in the church, we should be offended by the gospel. And wherever we find it impossible to forgive others who have wronged us, we should be offended by the radical grace and mercy of the gospel.

The Bible is full of scandal. Some of it we may recognize as the kind of tabloid scandal we are more accustomed to—like the story of David and Bathsheba. But when the folks of Nazareth were offended by their hometown boy Jesus, it was not because the scandal was *immoral* but because it was *un-settling*. The offensive one was Jesus the carpenter, the craftsman who built up a community by

dismantling the dividing walls, and whose radical mercy and ready welcome are still scandalous. And it may be that the gospel of Jesus Christ is as offensive to good and decent folks like us, as it was to the good and decent people of Jesus's hometown because it calls into question our deep-seated, tenaciously held notions of what it means to be fully human; because it calls us to be fully human by being fully Christ-like.

If we are *not* offended by the gospel, we probably have not really heard and understood what it has to say to us. If we are *not* scandalized, it is unlikely that we have recognized what is *good* about the *good news*, and it is unlikely that we will be changed by its power.

In the middle of this episode in Mark's gospel, Jesus says that a prophet is not without honor except among his own kin, and in his own house. Then Mark ends this episode with an odd twist. He says that Jesus "could do no deeds of power there," and that "he was amazed at their unbelief."

I wonder, if Jesus were to make a homecoming here would he be so amazed at our unbelief, at our offense, that he would be unable to do deeds of power in Mason City?

May we be sufficiently scandalized and appropriately offended by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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