

“Scandalously Ordinary – Sacramentally Powerful”

The local boy has gathered a following and now returns to preach to the hometown folks. The synagogue was probably packed. The word had gotten back to Nazareth. They'd heard about His teaching with authority – healing diseases – casting out demons.

He seems to fit the bill for the long-awaited Messiah – but this is Jesus, the carpenter, the son of Mary – and here are His brothers and sisters. Rather than being impressed, they were scandalized, offended, put off. Who does He think He is?

The incarnation of God (God taking on flesh) offends, it scandalizes, it causes people to stumble over their own expectation of how God is supposed to work. We expect more than a carpenter in po-dunk Nazareth – born to a questionable pregnancy – related to such common folk. We want God to be Godlike not ordinary.

“Familiarity breeds contempt,” is the saying – and the closer you are, the worse it is. This is Jesus' hometown. They'd watched Him grow up, He'd played in their streets. Yes, He was without sin, but He didn't stand out – there wasn't a glow around His head, no shining face and garments – just an ordinary kid who went off to Judea, was baptized by His cousin John, and now has come back. The people are naturally suspicious.

We fall into the same trap – expecting God to be like God – not like us. Our fallen, sinful nature keeps telling us that we have to work our way up to God – but God reveals that He descends to us, to dwell in the midst of us, to be at work all around us. And that doesn't seem right – that's not how we picture God to be at work.

“A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.” Familiarity breeds contempt. You trip over the ordinary because you expect God to be extraordinary.

The scandal that takes place in that synagogue in Nazareth is the scandal of the sacraments. They were offended at this ordinary Jesus, the kid who grew up around the corner – and we're offended at ordinary water, and words, and bread and wine. It's the same scandal.

They're too simple, too common and everyday – too ordinary to be something that God chooses to be at work through. That's why man tries to put his own spin on them – calling them signs or symbols – but not the “real thing.” But God's Word says otherwise.

“This is my body ... this is my blood.” This water is a washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Baptism now saves you. He who hears you, hears me. You see, God really is doing grand and glorious things – but He chooses to do His work through simple means.

Scandalously ordinary, and sacramentally powerful. Jesus “for you” in that water – those words – that bread and wine. How can this be? Don't ask. Don't try to figure out the mystery. Don't insist that you have to be on the same level with God – that you have to be able to figure Him out – in order for His Word to be true. Just receive. Faith doesn't question “how.” Faith simply receives, and says “Amen.”

“And He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them.”

Unbelief gets in the way. Remember the woman last week with the discharge of blood – the one to whom Jesus said – “Your faith has saved you”? The text says that Jesus felt power go out of Him when she touched the hem of His garment – but no power was going out of Jesus in His hometown because of unbelief.

Faith depends on Jesus – unbelief gets in the way of what Jesus has to give. That's what makes it damning. God wants to give you salvation in Christ – but unbelief says “No, I don't want any part of it!”

And yet, a few did believe. The Lord always has His little remnant of believers. There were a few who looked beyond the ordinary and familiar face of Jesus and saw the face of God, because they trusted Him, they took Him at His Word. And He healed them – all the while marveling at the unbelief of His own home town and synagogue.

Most of the people who knew Him best did not believe in Him. May the Lord preserve us from the scandal of familiarity! May we never grow so comfortable and familiar with the holy things of Christ, that we become like Nazareth.

On the heels of this less than successful visit to His hometown – Jesus gathers His Twelve and sends them out two by two – giving them authority to heal and cast out demons. That sounds familiar, doesn't it? The Twelve are authorized to do what Jesus Himself does – and that's the point – Jesus goes with them, and it is Jesus who does the healing and the casting out.

In other words, even after His Ascension into heaven – Jesus continues His ministry of teaching, preaching, healing, casting out demons, and resurrecting the dead. He does this through His Church – through the Apostles whom He sends in His name and with His authority – and which He continues even in our days, through His pastors who shepherd His Church.

And it shouldn't really surprise us when Jesus is rejected in our day – when He is met with unbelief, and can “do no mighty work” in our midst. His means of grace are still scandalous. How can water do such great things? How can eating and drinking do such great things? How can the words of absolution from this man open heaven?

Believing God's Word does not come from our own reason or strength. We don't finally figure out the mystery and see HOW God does such great things through such ordinary means.

Faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, working through the Word. We are by nature like Nazareth neighbors of Jesus – skeptical, unbelieving. But the Holy Spirit shines the light of God's Word into the darkness of our unbelieving hearts – He washes us and unites us to Jesus – recreating us, so that we may hear His voice and follow Him.

He speaks His promises to you today, giving His gifts – the healing of sins forgiven, the promise of the resurrection of your body, and the life everlasting which is yours even now by faith – and by the Holy Spirit, faith receives the gifts and says “Amen.”

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.