

Mark 6.1-6
An Exposition for the
Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
“Unbelief is Amazingly Stupid”

July 27, 2003

Rev. Dr. Jonathan C. Naumann
Redeemer Lutheran Church
Oakmont, Pennsylvania

Grace, Mercy and Peace from
Almighty God,
the Father, the Son ✠ and the
Holy Spirit. Amen.

The reading that we will look at more closely today is from the Gospel lesson in which we are told that Jesus

^{ESV} *‘. . . went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.*

² *And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?”*

³ *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.*

⁴ *And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.”*

⁵ *And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.*

⁶ *And he marveled because of their unbelief.*

And he went about among the villages teaching.

Unbelief is amazing!

Today’s sermon text is a sad story because it’s about unbelief. Usually we talk about Jesus as the object of our faith ... and for good reason. Today we are going to switch gears to talk about unbelief, the enemy of faith. This sermon text teaches us that **unbelief is amazing**: it’s *amazingly stupid, amazingly destructive, and amazingly sad*.

Unbelief is amazing; first of all it’s *amazingly stupid*. Our text says,

"Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. 'Where did this man get these things?' they asked. 'What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles!'"

Our sermon text gets off to a great start. Jesus preached God’s Word in the local church building and impressed the crowd to no end. They were so amazed that they wondered where Jesus had gotten His wisdom to preach and His power to perform miracles. We expect that the next verse will tell us that many people believed in Him. Yet the next verses of our text show us that these people refused to believe in Jesus.

One of the most outspoken agnostic bishops in the American Episcopal church — retired Bishop John Shelby Spong — used to claim that he read and studied the Bible every day. Yet even

though he knew what the Bible said, he didn't believe in it or in Jesus. He was just like the people of Nazareth; they rejected Jesus when He was right there.

Unbelief is stupid because it rejects the greatest gift ever given: forgiveness and the promise of heaven.

Our text continues: "*Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?*" And they took offense at him." They rejected Jesus because they thought He was nothing more than an ordinary person, someone they had watched growing up.

They practically said, "How can an ordinary carpenter possibly be the Messiah?" They said that He was Mary's son. Usually sons were identified as the son of their father. Some have argued that this shows that Joseph was dead at this time; that very well might be true. It's also possible that they were insulting Jesus.

On another occasion, Jesus' enemies argued that He had been born out of wedlock. Perhaps these people of Mary and Joseph's hometown were thinking back 30 years to the time when everyone found out Mary was pregnant but not married. In any case, our text says that they took offense at Jesus. **They let the fact that they had known Jesus for 30 years blind them to the fact that He was the Son of God!** The Greek word for taking offense is also used for a trap that snaps closed on someone. The trap of unbelief was snapping shut on these people.

They say one should never take it for granted when three generations in any family are committed Christians because it's so easy for people to start taking something as familiar as the Gospel for granted. That is exactly what happened in our sermon text; the people found it impossible to put their faith in someone they had known for so long. We can see that tendency in our own hearts, can't we?

What grabs our attention the fastest—the Bible on our shelf or the new Friday night movie? Which do we get more excited about—our time for devotions or this week's football game? We can fall into the sin of taking the Gospel for granted. When we stop to think, we realize just how stupid this kind of behavior is.

One great thing about teaching a Bible information class is that I get to experience people learning Bible truths for the first time. That helps me not to take the Gospel for granted. Every time we share our faith with someone the same sort of thing happens. It keeps our faith fresh and alive.

So, as I have said, from one perspective unbelief is amazing—amazingly stupid. It is also *amazingly destructive*. Our sermon text says, "*He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.*"

This is a shocking verse because it seems to say that Jesus was powerless to do any miracles. Yet this verse simply doesn't say why Jesus could not do any miracles. He couldn't do any miracles

because He didn't want to perform miracles among such an unbelieving group. Imagine how destructive these people's unbelief was. It kept Jesus from displaying His miracles to them!

It is written in the Psalms, *"The LORD does whatever pleases Him"* (Psalm 135:6). Jeremiah marveled, *"Ah Lord God! You have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for You"* (Jeremiah 32:17). Gabriel proclaimed to Mary, *"Nothing is impossible for God"* (Luke 1:37) and Jesus Himself declares, *"All things are possible with God"* (Mark 10:27). Isaiah tells no lies when he says to Israel, *"Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save"* (Isaiah 59:1).

But yet Jesus could not do any miracles there [in His hometown], except lay His hands on a few sick people and heal them. The Giver of Life could raise none who were dead; the Executioner of the Devil could cast out no demons; the LORD of Creation could not exert any power over that which He had created. *"Jesus could not do any miracles there, except lay His hands on a few sick people and heal them."*

Isaiah indeed tells no lies when he says to Israel, *"Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save"* (Isaiah 59:1). But that is not all that Isaiah said to Israel: *"Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save,"* he declares, *"nor His ear too dull to hear. **But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear"** (Isaiah 59:1-2).* It is not that Jesus lost His divinity or His power when He entered His hometown.

His hometown simply refused the fact that He is divine.

It is not that Jesus was unable to do any miracles there, but He was prevented from doing so by people who would not take Him seriously.

"Jesus could not do any miracles there, except lay His hands on a few sick people and heal them." Here in this Gospel, Jesus is like a surgeon who is ready to perform life-saving by-pass surgery but cannot, because the patient refuses to believe that his heart's arteries have hardened and clogged. In this Gospel, Jesus is like a soldier who breaks into a POW camp to free the prisoners, only to find that the prisoners would rather not be free, but like it there in the confines of the camp. The soldier cannot free the prisoners of war, because the prisoners will not be freed.

Jesus could not do any miracles there in His hometown because He was not allowed to do any miracles. The people regarded His miraculous actions with doubt and disdain, and they looked upon Him as merely the hometown boy and the carpenter's Son. *"Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't His sisters here with us? And they took offense at Him"* (Mark 6:3).

Even today this is the way that the good and gracious will of our Creator and Redeemer gets set aside for human thoughts and fallen desires. Jesus' hometown renders Him useless, so to speak. They *"empty the cross of its power,"* to borrow a phrase from St. Paul (1 Corinthians 1:17).

Unbelief is just as destructive today. Unbelief locks out all of God's peace and joy. Sometimes when something bad happens to a Christian they tell me, "I don't know how I could handle this if I didn't have my faith." That is absolutely true. Unbelievers end up dealing with this life's problems without the Lord.

The ultimate destructiveness of unbelief will show itself on Judgment Day when God banished unbelievers from His presence.

Unbelief is amazing – finally, it's *amazingly sad*. Our text says, "And Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith." Jesus' amazement was not the kind of amazement that says, "Wow, look at that." It was the kind of amazement that can't believe how tragic something is. At the end of His ministry Jesus overlooked the city of Jerusalem and expressed the same sad emotion when He said: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"

Nothing is so heartbreaking as listening to parents talk about their children who are straying from the Lord or who don't seem to think spiritual matters are very important. It's heartbreaking to hear someone talk about a co-worker who is their friend and is a genuinely nice person but who has no time for the Lord.

This has not been a very cheery sermon because our topic was not particularly cheery. Unbelief always has been and always will be a horribly sad affair.

Yet while people are alive, unbelief does not have to be the end of the story. There is still time for us to reach them with the Word of God.

The work of Christ does not have to be in vain for the very people for whom He died and rose again. Those people, like you and me, have to appreciate that simple sacramental phrase 'for you.'

- Jesus is "God almighty, who was and is and is to come" (Revelation 4:8), yet His almighty power to save is in vain if He is not God **for you**.
- Jesus is the Lamb whose blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins, but what good is His blood **to you** if His blood does not wash away **your sins**?
- Jesus died on a cross, as even an unbelieving historian might tell you. But unless you appreciate and trust that Jesus' death and His cross are **for you**, the cross is rendered powerless and useless and wasted.

The people of God would do well never to move to "Jesus' hometown," so to speak. The people of Jesus' hometown entirely missed the "for you" of the Christian faith, and the whole of the Christian faith boils down to these two little words, "**for you**."

Without these two little words, as small as they may be, you have no Christ! Without the words "**for you**," you have no Baptism, no Holy Communion, no forgiveness of sins, no healing, no hope, no peace, and no resurrection to eternal life! To paraphrase today's Gospel just a bit: Without the words "for you," Jesus cannot do any miracles here in Pittsburgh!!!!

But with the words “for you,” you have your full share in every gift that Jesus gives! Every second of His existence, from the point of His conception in Mary’s womb to this very moment, Jesus’ life is a life lived for you!

Every step He takes, every word He utters, every time He lays His hands upon the sick or the demon-possessed, He does so for you. Every insult, every rejection, every blow, every lash of the whip is borne for you!!!!

When you have “FOR YOU,” then you have BAPTISM, for the baptismal liturgy says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

When you have the “FOR YOU” of the Christian faith, then you have HOLY COMMUNION, for this is Jesus’ body “which is given for you” and Jesus’ blood “shed for you for the remission of sins.” And as you already know, “the words ‘for you’ require all hearts to believe.”

When you have “FOR YOU,” the cross is by no means emptied of its power, but it is for you “*the power of God unto salvation*” (1 Corinthians 1:18), the very source of life and resurrection. With the words “for you” come all the blessings of Jesus’ life and death: His forgiveness, His healing, His hope, His peace, and His resurrection to eternal life.

With the words “for you” you have the sacrifice for your sins, the sacrifice that Jesus carried out in His own bloodshed and death. Jesus says “*a prophet is*

without honor (v.4) in his hometown.” But He has given His Holy Spirit unto you, His Church, so that here He is held in honor; here His words and deeds for you are trusted, believed, and kept in heart and mind. You and I stand up for Jesus, because Jesus is standing up for you.

Jesus is able and willing and desiring to do mighty things, and He has done them out of His great love “FOR YOU!” As Acts 2:39 puts it: “*The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off -- for all whom the Lord our God will call!*” Because you know that He stands for you, stand up for Jesus. Amen.

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all contentment in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.