

“Homecoming Rules”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Mark 6:1-13

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I joke that I am an interim pastor, because I can't hold a job. The longest pastorate I have had was five and a half years as an associate pastor in Joplin, Missouri. Due in large part to the connections made with others whose children were the ages of our three, there was a unique closeness we felt with that congregation. After we left Joplin to work with Habitat for Humanity in Pennsylvania, the church sent work camps to work with us. Then, when it took three years to sell our Joplin house during the late 1980's recession, members of the church organized themselves into a work camp to help us paint and repair the house. It sold the next week.

Four years ago, I returned to Joplin for a week to help with tornado recovery efforts, visit a church family who had lost a son in the tornado, and particularly be with our closest friends who had lost their home, along with 26 other church families. It was a sort of homecoming with a congregation with which we have continued to feel a closeness over the miles and years.

Yet, as I studied the Gospel lesson we are about to hear, I thought of another visit to Joplin that was a bit different. Lynn and I altered some vacation plans so we could go there to visit a good friend who was dying. When the church's pastor heard of it, he called to invite me to preach. I accepted with a mixture of excitement, reluctance and a bit of anxiety. What to preach was the question.

It was November 2002, that saber-rattling time leading up to the Iraq war. I ended up preaching a sermon in politically conservative southwestern Missouri that was, let's just say, not politically neutral. I admit that there was a certain arrogance in my thinking, “This is something they need to hear.” The reaction was predictable. Those few whose faith and politics paralleled my own were appreciative; others, including some of our closest friends, were eerily silent. Conversations quickly shifted to children and family. I clearly felt I had offended good friends.

I can't say that Joplin homecoming was like that of Jesus returning to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth in our Gospel lesson this morning. Yet, one similarity I find between the two homecomings is both Jesus and I may have broken the homecoming rules. Whether the return is to a former church or childhood neighborhood, a high school or college reunion, or simply an annual family gathering, I think there are certain unwritten rules to follow, particularly if there has been a gap of time since you last saw the folks.

Let us now hear of Jesus' homecoming, his hometown's reaction, and the subsequent sending of his twelve disciples on a mission in Mark 6:1-13:

*Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. <sup>2</sup>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! <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." <sup>5</sup>And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. <sup>6</sup>And he was amazed at their unbelief.*

*Then he went about among the villages teaching. <sup>7</sup>He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. <sup>8</sup>He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; <sup>9</sup>but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. <sup>10</sup>He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. <sup>11</sup>If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." <sup>12</sup>So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. <sup>13</sup>They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*

From time to time, I hear people of a certain age talk of returning "home" for their fiftieth high school reunion. Now just three years away from that certain age, I am not sure if my class will come together for number fifty given my high school in Albany closed forty years ago. When we consider reuniting for such reunions or homecomings, I think there are some unwritten rules it might be wise to ponder. I'm sure you can think of others, but here are five:

1. Fit in – don't dress above or below others such that you become the focus of attention;
2. Stand down – even if you once were, you are no longer the homecoming king or queen, the baseball MVP, or the National Merit scholar;
3. Remain neutral – keep your politics and religion at home; this is the rule I did not follow in that 2002 Joplin visit;
4. Silence your pride, particularly if there is reason people will be proud of you – don't be uppity, or talk above others to show off your education, wealth, or success; especially, don't brag about your children's education, wealth or success. You can do that in your annual Christmas letter where it is expected.
5. Stay local – don't tell stories of all the places you have traveled or people you have met unless, and if you do, remember to end your stories by saying, "But you know, there's no place like Sudbury, or Albany, or Joplin, or Mayberry RFD, or Nazareth!" In other words, even if you have been to the Land of Oz, your last words should be, "There's no place like home."

Admittedly, the goal in following the rules is somewhat selfish; that is, to assure you will not be the focus of conversation when people talk in the hallways, or tweet on their smart phones. You've heard the lines: "Do you believe her? Who made him the world authority? Doesn't she remember where she came from? His brothers and sisters aren't like that!"

Similar words were uttered almost twenty centuries ago in a Nazareth synagogue: "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!" And then to bring it back to a very local matter, they rhetorically ask, "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?"

Then Mark writes, "And they took offense at him." They took offense at him. The word in Greek is *skandalidzo* – his hometown folk felt scandalized by Jesus' offending words and actions.

Perhaps they had wanted Jesus to talk about the good old days, pranks they had played in the neighborhood, times they had skipped synagogue school. Perhaps they wanted a back-slapping Jesus who would keep it light and homey. What they received was an old friend who came in and preached and taught as one who had authority, and it offended his hometown friends, and ruined his homecoming. It is suggested they even stooped to name calling, because by referring to Jesus as Mary's son, they were calling him a fatherless child, an insult in that culture.

Mark structures his Gospel narrative carefully. He notes Jesus' disciples had followed him to Nazareth. So, they saw the faces of those who had known Jesus longest. They heard their words of derision and rejection. A familiar saying of the time was, *Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown...* The disciples heard Jesus extend the saying by adding, *and among their own kin, and in their own house.* The rejection was total.

We are not told what Jesus said that so offended. Likely, it was not political because no one liked the Romans. It could have simply been Jesus was seen as uppity, but the reference to prophets make us sense he challenged their lifestyles or structures, their loyalties or allegiances.

Loyalties and allegiances are strong forces in our lives as well. Yesterday, we marked the public announcement of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and the day seems to have a built-in expectation of national pride, allegiance and loyalty. There are times we don't want the sovereignty of God uplifted in our Psalm 48 Call to Worship, or the teachings of Jesus to interfere with our heartfelt loyalties. Yet, what happens when loyalty to Christ conflicts with loyalty to country?

There are often expectations in our work or the organizations of which we are a part. Companies, unions, clubs, schools, teams or political parties each can expect a blind loyalty and claim a priority for our time. Yet, what do we do when blind loyalty goes against Jesus' teaching?

There are also family expectations and loyalties, some which we create and others we feel are placed on us. Yet, how do we handle those times when we sense we are betraying who God is calling us to be what God is wanting us to say for the sake of family loyalty?

Even within the church, we may be tempted to be loyal to a certain theology or social policy. In the church we do not refer to the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, but the Bible; yet, what we know is that two people of faith, with vastly different viewpoints, can open their Bibles and quote Scripture with a passion in which both imply, “My belief is the truth and in synch with Jesus.” It is a reminder for all that even while upholding Scripture, we are to be humble in quoting it.

Rejected by those who knew him longer and better, Jesus turns to his new inner circle, followers who have chosen to follow him. He appoints them to a mission. Humility and simplicity, not pride and arrogance are the focus of the rules Jesus gives them – take no bag, no food, no money, stay with others, depend on others. No agreeing to stay with one family, and then changing when you learn a family down the street has a hot tub or a better cook. Jesus knows even the perception of pride or importance, security or wealth could be a barrier to people believing, and affect the authority Jesus has given them to teach and heal.

At times, I still wonder if I should have preached that sermon in Joplin, or a few others elsewhere that seem to have raised more than eyebrows. Perhaps I should have. Perhaps not. Yet, I ponder it, not because I received a cold or negative response, but because I know there is a difference between preaching a sermon I think people need to hear it, and one where I truly sense God wants it to be heard. This keeps me alert to ensuring my faith is shaping my politics, and not my politics my faith.

As people of faith, we are called to a life guided by the humility and simplicity of the one who was rejected at his own homecoming. We are sent as Jesus’ disciples, following his rules, and understanding his teachings and love trump any other homecoming rules or competing loyalties or allegiances of nation, work, or family.

The good news is we are not sent alone. As we are gathered in this place, we can imagine walking all together on the road with and for Jesus of Nazareth. And today, we meet up for a homecoming at his table. By grace, this table is set for all who seek to follow Christ, regardless of class or race, gender or orientation, and yes, even regardless of politics – for those are homecoming rules Jesus sets forth in inviting us to dine together.