

Senseless gospel

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Once I finished working with this week's gospel text, I went back into my files to see how many times I've managed to preach on it in my seven circuits through the lectionary. I found that I've missed it more often than not—no surprise there, as it falls at a convenient time of year for that. And when I have preached on it, the sermon has always been on one half of the text or the other—either on the scene in the Nazareth synagogue or on the sending of the disciples. I have never written a sermon that dealt with both stories.

This is one of those weeks where the lectionary offers us a gospel reading that is more liturgical than literary. Scholars, at the least the scholars on my shelves, are unanimous that Mark 6:6 is a fairly significant transition in the structure of the gospel. The Nazareth synagogue ends a section of the gospel, and the sending of the disciples begins Mark's next move. The lectionary does not like short gospel readings, so it blows through this transition and pretends that all 13 verses are one coherent unit. This makes preaching on the text as a whole a particular challenge—one that I have apparently found easy enough to avoid.

Yet there is a theme that ties this passage together. In both episodes, the gospel—the good news of the kingdom and the invitation to repentance—is rejected by many of those who hear it. This resistance is not in this case belligerent or antagonistic. Mark presents it instead as the voice of common sense raising objections to the proposition that this is how God intends to bring the kingdom into being.

We see this in the Nazareth synagogue, and then when Jesus sends out the disciples he prepares them for rejection in advance. Arguably, he sets them up for rejection by sending them out as dispossessed itinerant prophets. How likely is it that huge multitudes are going to believe this band of stripped-down Galilean peasant missionaries?

The gospel is opposed at every turn by the voice of common sense. What can Jesus do for the girl after she has died? Why are these people bothering Jesus with their children? How can we possibly feed this multitude out here in the countryside? What do you mean you want us to go steal a donkey for you?

In so many ways, the gospel does not make sense. When we forget this—when we assume that it is self-evident that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, when we allow our certainty to silence the objections of common sense—we risk a sort of triumphant arrogance that forecloses on faith. And faith is a gift of the Spirit, not an accomplishment of reason or virtue.

Let us not be too quick, then, to shake the dust from our feet. Remember that this is a delightfully unconventional gospel.