

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. ² 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! ³ 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.

⁴ Jesus said to them, “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.” ⁵ He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. ⁶ And he was amazed at their lack of faith. (Mark 6:1-6)

Why Don’t People Believe?

Some people have faith and some people don’t. Why not? When I was in the army, I shared my faith with a number of people, most of them friends. But as far as I know, not one of them ever became a believer because of anything I said. I’ve prayed on and off for some of those people for almost thirty years now. I hope that God uses someone to bring them the gospel and that he gives them faith so that we’ll be in heaven together. But I don’t know. I look at my own family and I bet my experience isn’t much different than most of yours. I have some relatives who are very faithful in coming to church. Then there are others who are like the people in the gospel lesson for today. They claim to be believers. But they rarely darken God’s doorway. They make choices that they once knew are sinful. Do they believe? I don’t know. But if they don’t, why not? This morning as we look at an incident from the life of Jesus we want to consider a question that sincere Christians always find a little disturbing: **Why don’t people believe?**

I.

There’s always a reason. Almost always, unbelievers point to some reason why they don’t believe. That’s what happened in the gospel lesson for today. Jesus came back to Nazareth, his hometown in Galilee. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but when he was very young, his family moved way up north and he grew up in this fishing village on the Sea of Galilee. After his baptism, he began to preach and teach and do miracles and very quickly he became the most famous religious teacher in the country. Jesus decided it was time to go back to Nazareth. But this wasn’t a family visit. This wasn’t a break from work or responsibility. Jesus went home to share the gospel with the people he had known all his life. He preached in their synagogue and he did miracles, so that they would believe that he was God’s chosen Savior, the Messiah.

But it didn’t go over well. The people asked, **“Where did this man get these things? What’s this wisdom that has been given him that he even does miracles! 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?”** They knew him. They knew his family. They just couldn’t believe that he could possibly be a real prophet. They didn’t buy that the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon could be the promised Savior. That just didn’t square with what they knew about them.

Jesus made an observation that still affects the way Christian churches choose whom to call for ministry. He said, **“Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.”** Being a prophet – being called by God to proclaim his message to his people – is an honor. God’s people love and respect the messengers he sends to them. But that respect often evaporates among people who’ve known you all your life. If the people that Jesus had grown up with couldn’t get past his family and their memories of him as a boy, then what about us? Jesus had no sin, but we do. It would be hard to serve aunts and uncles who remember all the ways that a pastor disobeyed or defied his parents. One pastor I know received a call to serve a congregation near where he had grown up. One of the council members from that church used his high school nickname with him on the phone. It’s hard to serve a church where people know what you did in your youth, even if you weren’t the kind of kid who was constantly in the principal’s office. It’s hard for people who know your history to take you seriously when you talk to them about turning from sin and making a commitment to God and his word.

For that reason, the people of Nazareth took offense at Jesus. They refused to believe him. There’s always a reason, at least in the minds of people we speak to, why they don’t believe. Quite often, the reason is

all about the mind and heart of the one we're speaking to. These people had no memories of Jesus smarting off to teachers or disobeying his parents, but they refused to look past their knowledge of his family. There was nothing Jesus could've said that would've changed their minds. And many of the people that we talk to will simply refuse to believe as well. They may point to all kinds of reasons – “that book” has caused more bloodshed than anything else in history. I've heard that. Or “Christians are hypocrites. They claim to be better than the rest of us, but they're not.” Or even, “Have you seen God?” I've heard that one, too. And the list goes on and on and it's really all about their own hearts and minds.

What do we do when we have the same sad experience that Jesus did? When people we love and want to see in heaven – our own children or nieces and nephews or friends choose to take offense at our faith and at our efforts to point them to Christ? Without a doubt, it will break our hearts, because we do love those people. But the fact that they refuse to listen doesn't mean we have to stop sharing. God doesn't just give us one chance to hear his word. Our whole life on this earth is an opportunity to hear and believe. So there is always hope. If God has elected someone to believe, he will get the job done, if not through us, then through someone else. We can look for signs of his work. Finally, we can do no better than to entrust that child or that adult to God and pray – for years perhaps – that he would bring faith in his time and in his way.

But I think it's much harder when we have to admit that the reason someone doesn't believe does have something to do with us. We didn't get our kids baptized. We didn't bring them to church or Sunday school. Or we did bring them, but we didn't teach them at home. We thought that when we dropped them off at Lutheran elementary school or Lutheran high school, we did our part and now it was up to those teachers to take care of their faith. That's not what God says. We parents have the responsibility first of all. When our children aren't faithful, it's hard to escape from what God says about our responsibility. And we have to admit that we're sinners. We can drive people away with our sinful and prideful attitude. I will never forget how one of those guys that I still pray for asked me, “Are you never wrong?” After that question, he wouldn't listen to me anymore. Jesus didn't have to deal with that kind of guilt, because he had no sin. But we do. What do we do?

There is only one thing we can do: confess our sin and our arrogance and our unfaithfulness. Even we parents who've tried to be faithful in teaching our children to know the Lord have to admit we've fallen short. Even those of us who want to share the gospel with others have to admit that it's hard not to let sinful pride get in the way. And when our sin closes a door, the guilt that causes is horrible. But Jesus alone was the perfect gospel preacher. Jesus alone never drove anyone away. Jesus was perfect in sharing the gospel because we aren't. He was perfect in our place. Now, when God looks at all of our failed efforts to teach our children and to share with the people around us, he sees Jesus doing it right, doing it with love and humility, every single time. And he calls us perfect. And if that weren't enough, he sees Jesus dying to pay for all that sin and failure. Jesus died because my friend saw pride and arrogance and asked, “Are you never wrong?” He died for me. And he died for you. And he paid for every time we failed him and every time we failed our children and our friends and co-workers. Then he rose and God forgave us. God sent me, your pastor, to tell you today, “I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” That forgiveness is as real and certain in heaven itself as if Jesus Christ himself had dealt with us. Our sin is wiped away.

And God does one more thing to comfort us: he promises that his elect will come to faith. Maybe they would've come sooner if we had done our job right. Maybe they would've become Lutherans and had the blessings of our pure doctrine instead of winding up in some other church. But if they are chosen by God, he will give them faith in his good time. And he will bring them to heaven.

II.

There are lots of reasons why people don't believe. The young adult who was raised in an observant Muslim family has different reasons for disbelieving than the cynical college student who father claims to believe, but drinks himself unconscious every night then uses guilt on his children. But when it comes to the question **why don't people believe? There's always one real reason.**

That reason is the hardness of the human heart. We were all born as unbelievers. The very last verse of our gospel lesson says, “**And he was amazed at their lack of faith.**” That tells us something about that principle of a preacher not being accepted by his family and his home congregation. It's generally true, but not always. Twice in the last couple of years, the congregation that I grew up in has asked me to come home and preach for anniversary services. I didn't detect any lack of respect, although those family members who never come to church still didn't show up. One of my classmates at the seminary was the son of your former pastor.

He grew up here. Another son of this congregation graduated from the seminary just a few years ago and he's come to preach for me when I've been gone. No one rejected him as far as I know. What was the difference between those situations and that of Jesus? That lack of faith that amazed Jesus. The reason that my home congregation could gladly hear me preach, the reason that you can gladly hear the sons of this congregation preach, is faith. Faith trusts in the Lord and recognizes his messenger because that messenger brings the good news about Jesus. But unbelief always rejects the message. And it finds excuses to do so. To the unbeliever, those excuses seem valid. Even we can see some truth in them. But the real problem is that all human beings are born unbelievers. All unbelievers refuse to accept Christ.

Jesus was amazed by the unbelief of these people. He was the Son of God. He knew everything. He knew how they would react before he ever came to Nazareth. And he was amazed. The depth of sin and unbelief in the human heart awed even the Son of God. I guess it's like when you look down at the Grand Canyon and you're amazed. Not surprised, we've all seen pictures of it. But when you stand there and see it for yourself, it moves you. Only, that's a positive thing. This was a negative thing. It might be like what you'd feel if you were the witness to a fatal traffic accident and when it was done, you just couldn't stop staring at the bodies of the people in the car. The Son of God was moved by the unbelief of the people of Nazareth.

That actually gives us hope. Because the Son of God came to conquer unbelief. The Son of God gave us the good news that makes us believers. He sent his Holy Spirit to work through that message. He lives in our hearts today. And in love, Jesus gave us the holy ministry to proclaim that good news to us, week after week and year after year, from cradle to Lutheran elementary school and high school and Sunday school, to grave. That gospel is the very power of God. God works through that message and he overcomes the unbelief in our hearts. So week after week, he tells us that we are forgiven and loved and welcomed. When we feel the temptation to unbelief – and we all will; it's part of life in a sinful world – we have the power of Christ fighting for us. We have the grace of God in the good news to keep us in the faith.

Why don't people believe? Finally the only reason is the hardness of their human hearts. They refuse to accept what God has said. That is true for all of us. We were all born unbelievers and we fought against the good news with all our strength. None of us should believe. But why do we? Because the Son of God came to us in the gospel and he conquered our unbelief. The Son of God did a miracle, a miracle we don't deserve, a miracle that we can't take any credit for. But a miracle that means that we will live with him forever. Thank God that he loves you that much. Thank God that he gave you faith that trusts in Christ alone. And commit yourself to sharing that good news, through the ministry of our congregation, and through your own efforts to share the gospel. Amen.