

## 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

Have you ever had the experience of someone being astonished by something you've done? I don't necessarily mean the "How could you do such a thing?!" kind of astonishment, that perhaps our parents felt when we were being less than our best selves.

It can also happen that a person can be astonished by something good we've done, as in "I didn't know he had that in him."

Astonishment comes when our actions do not fit well with the unspoken expectations that another person has made of us. I can still remember when my sister Anita heard me sing the Gospel acclamation at Mass. From her face I felt like I could read her thoughts: "He can sing? Who knew?"

What's interesting about the astonishment that we read about in today's Gospel is that it was not the first time that Mark indicates that Jesus' hearers were astonished at his word. Jesus' preaching ministry did not start in Nazareth. He had been to at least Capernaum, and the people there had been astonished by his teaching, too, but responded differently.

In Capernaum, apparently, Jesus' background and the familiarity that his contemporaries in Nazareth had with him were absent, so people had more freedom to simply take him as he was.

In Nazareth they knew him too well. They knew

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his parents. They knew how he made his living. And maybe most importantly, they knew that he had never done anything like that before. Until he entered into his public ministry we can assume that his life was fairly conventional, and it was the breaking through of convention that fueled the astonishment.

And then a choice was made. Ideally, it should not matter where Jesus was from or what trade he had practiced. What he was saying and how he was acting should have been able to be taken on their own merits. He wasn't talking crazy talk, and the people who were healed of their afflictions were obviously better off than they had been before. Who in their right mind wouldn't want that?

The fact that people were choosing to discount his actions simply on the basis of their preference to keep thinking of him the way they had before was something Jesus found astonishing. There in Nazareth his eyes were opened to the fact that his ministry was going to meet much more opposition than he expected. And that opposition kept him from doing good.

When we become familiar with someone we almost have to gather in our minds predictable features of their personalities: their introverted or extroverted styles, their persistent fears, their penchants, their values, etc.

What happens then is that we can "nail all that

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down” into a hard and fast expectation—which gets reinforced everything they do something that fits in with it.

We can go happily through life like that until the day that we have the experience of overhearing the box that other people have put us into. We will almost certainly be offended because we know that, even if what they say is true, there’s more to us than that.

That’s the conundrum: being so quick to take offense at being discounted on the one hand, and so lax in exercising the discipline of remembering that no one fits in a box.

We are, by our nature, mystery. It’s part of being made in the image and likeness of God, who is Mystery with a capital M. There are layers to us that we have barely come into contact with, and layers to everyone else that are even more remote to our experience.

What would really be a mark of truly Christian practice is to give people room to be more than we imagined; to be open to new elements coming to the surface. Things happen. We suppress a lot. And sometimes we don’t discover our deeper truths until quite a lot of water has gone under the bridge. What a tragedy if when we get to that point, no one wants to hear about it because it doesn’t fit in with how we were before.

True, when a person proclaims they’ve changed,

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there ought to be some evidence of that in their behavior. But deep change takes a while to unfold and the old coexists with the new—at least to begin with.

How we respond to the changes taking place in others has a huge effect on whether those changes can take hold or whether the person ends reverting to old ways because of lack of support.

Today's gospel shows that even Jesus had to be supported in his new life in order for it to have full effect. That day in Nazareth was tragic. The hour of their visitation had arrived and they missed it because of thinking they knew all there was to know about Jesus.

God keep us from making a similar mistake in our interactions with others this week.

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1. Someone being astonished by something you've done: could be good or bad.

"How could you do such a thing?"

Or

"I didn't know he had it in him."

2. Astonishment: when our actions do not fit well with others' unspoken expectations

An example: my sister Anita upon hearing me sing for the first time. "He can sing?! Who knew?"

3. Astonishment in today's gospel: not the first time it happened. Jesus preached in Capernaum, too, and people were astonished, but with a different response.

They didn't know Jesus, were free to simply take him as he was.

In Nazareth, they knew him well: who his parents were, what he did for a living, that he had never done anything like that before.

Up to that point his life had been conventional.

He had broken through the conventional and they were astonished.

4. Then a choice was made.

Background should not have mattered. The words and actions could have been taken on their own merit.

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People chose to discount his actions simply on the basis of their preference to continue to think of him as they had in the past.

It's Jesus' turn to be astonished. His eyes were opened to the opposition that awaited him—there and elsewhere.

5. Almost a foregone conclusion—when we become familiar with someone we gather into our minds predictable features of their personalities: introvert or extrovert, what they fear, what they value, etc.

The problem: nailing down what we know into hard and fast expectations—which then get reinforced every time the other does what we think he will do.

6. Oblivious to that fact until we experience how that's been done to us. We discover the box another has put us into and it seems so unfair and offensive.

We know there's more to us than that.

7. The conundrum: our experience of when that happens to us does not get translated into questioning whether we are doing that to someone else.

We are, by our nature, mystery. Part of being made in the image and likeness of God, Mystery with a capital M.

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There are layers to us we have barely come into contact with; layers to everyone else that are even more remote from our awareness.

8. A truly Christian practice: giving people room to be more than we imagined. Leaving room for the mystery that they are.

Things happen. Deeper truths come to the surface, sometimes even late in life.

What a tragedy if, when we get to that point, no one wants to hear about it because it doesn't fit their picture.

9. True, a proclamation "I changed" has to be followed up with a change in behavior.

But deep change takes a while to unfold and the old coexists with the new—at least to begin with.

How we respond to the changes taking place in others has a huge effect on whether those changes can take hold, or whether the person reverts to old ways for lack of support.

10. Gospel shows that that dynamic was true even in the context of Jesus' preaching.

That day in Nazareth was tragic! The Nazoreans missed the hour of their visitation—all because they let their familiarity dictate what they would hear from him.

11. There's constantly an hour for visitation for us,

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too—when someone grows beyond where they've been and we have the chance to accept or reject.

But also when we look at the scene on the national or global level and are tempted to say, "There's nothing new here, nothing that requires a change in our perspective. Just the pendulum swinging back and forth."

12. God keep us from missing the prophetic word in our day—from whatever corner it comes.