

“DIAGNOSIS: STEREOTYPICAL DETERMINATION”

Mark 6:1-6

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Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, tells the story of a traveling circus that moved from town to town in his native Denmark. One afternoon they had set up on the outskirts of a village and about forty-five minutes before the performance was to start, the great bigtop caught on fire. It happened that a clown was the only one in the troupe fully dressed, so immediately he was sent into the village to call for help. He did everything he possibly could. He urgently apprised everyone he encountered of the emergency, including fire service personnel, and begged their assistance.

The problem, though, was precisely that the man pleading for help was dressed as a clown and across the years the people had developed certain ideas about clowns. The people heard him in light of how they saw him. They concluded that all of the “clown’s” histrionics and talk of a fire were a part of his act seeking to attract people to the circus. It wasn’t until they looked on the horizon and saw an ominous red glow that they realized this wasn’t a clown act at all but a human being bearing an important message.

Many years ago Walter Lippmann, an American writer and political commentator, coined a word to describe the phenomenon that caused the clown to be disregarded. He called it “stereotyping” and defined it as “substituting pictures in the head for actual reality.” We construct images from the experiences we accumulate across the years. Then, when certain characteristics “trigger” an association, we relate not to the actual person or people standing in front of us but to the “pictures in our head” we have pieced together out of our past.

In the case of Kierkegaard’s clown, the stereotype that a clown should not be taken seriously masked a tragedy that could have been mitigated.

Whenever we relate to someone based on a stereotype rather than the reality of the actual person or persons in our midst, opportunities for learning and understanding, for building genuine community, and, as in the case of our gospel story today, encountering the Word of God, are sabotaged.

The problem of stereotyping existed long before Lippmann minted his word. It happened to Jesus when he returned to Nazareth shortly after he began his public ministry. All of Galilee was astir with excitement over the unique authority of his words and the power of his works. But, when Jesus came home to the people who had known him almost all of his life, something got in the way of their ability to receive and accept him.

At first the Nazarenes were caught up in the general excitement about Jesus. But quickly the "pictures in their heads" they had of Jesus from the past took over and prevented them from seeing and hearing him as he came to them in that moment. All the people could see were their images of the ways they had known him previously, as a younger man working in a carpenter's shop and being a routine part of their community. So now they sneered at his perceived arrogance: "The gall of him to think he can talk this way to us as though he knows more about God than we do. Does he forget we know where he comes from? Does he think he's better than us?" Others recalled his family of origin: "Isn't he *Mary's* son?" they asked with the hint of a slur in consideration of the rumors at the time of his birth he might be illegitimate.

"And his brothers and sisters still live here," they continued. "They're nothing special. He needs to be knocked down a peg or two." Images compiled from the past got interposed between Jesus and the people. Their prior experience of him led them to discount the possibility he could be something more than they had known him to be. As a result, things went differently in Nazareth with Jesus than they had anywhere else in Galilee. Jesus was amazed at their unbelief and because of it he could do no deed of power there.¹

Just as the people in Denmark missed the urgent message of the clown because of their previous experience of clowns, so the folks in Nazareth missed out on the ministry of Jesus. The past, like a cataract over their eyes, inserted itself into the present and blocked out any perception that Jesus had anything of value to offer them, much less the word of God.

Jesus was succinct in his assessment: "Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."²

¹ Mark 6:5-6

² Mark 6:4

The diagnosis for the Nazarenes' failure to receive and believe Jesus is "*stereotypical determination.*" Admittedly, it's a bad sermon title but it *is* an apt description of what was at work among the people in the Nazareth synagogue. They could not fathom that the Messiah of God could come from among them or that Jesus could be the One. "We know Jesus. He's one of us. He can't be the Holy One of Israel. He can't speak for God." Mark says "*they took offense at him.*"³

How often we dismiss bearers of the message and power of God because our stereotypical determination decides who can and cannot reach and teach us. We often are drawn to the big names, the famous preachers, the flamboyant orators, or those who have developed reputations from writing books or appearing on television. Let a celebrity proclaim the same thing the local cleric has been saying all along and it's as if the people never heard it before! "Ah, a revelation!" they say. Of course, the word of God can and sometimes does come through those who are well-known and esteemed. But, knowing from the scripture something of the way God works, a lot more often than we might admit or allow it is likely those we are prone to overlook or take for granted who possess the treasure.

Telling the Corinthians they ought to expect the word of God to come from sources surprising to them, he said, "*Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are...*"⁴

And Gerard Manley Hopkins, the English poet and Jesuit priest, once wrote this lovely line: "*Christ plays in ten-thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his...*"⁵ I take that to mean that Christ appears in limitless places and people and if we allow our stereotyping to determine for us where and in whom Christ is present, then we are going to miss him much of the time.

We need to enlarge our acceptance of persons and people through whom the word of God can reach and teach us. Consider what the people in Nazareth missed because they stereotypically had determined God could not speak to them through a hometown boy. I shudder to think how many times I have missed out on something God wanted to teach me in my life because my "stereotypical determination" caused me to devalue or belittle someone through whom God was speaking. How many times have we closed off God's word and power

³ Mark 6:3

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:26-28

⁵ From Hopkins' well-known poem, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire"

to us because we have shut out God's messenger? If we can disparage or discredit the messenger, then we do not have to listen to the message, do we?

In this era of polarization in our society, perhaps those who consider themselves theologically and socially progressive or liberal may need to come to grips with the reality that a conservative or an evangelical might have a word from the Lord for us. For those who consider themselves conservative or evangelical, they cannot dismiss out of hand the possibility that those farther left can hold a divine message. Sure, we sift the words or, to use John's phrase, we *test the spirits*,⁶ that come to us purporting to be of God but stereotypically determining ahead of time from whom God's word can come is, as we have seen in our gospel story today, a dubious practice. According to Jesus, we might well miss out on what the Lord can do in us.⁷

I've had conversations with persons who have rung the doorbell of our church seeking assistance that have dripped with insight and wisdom into the kingdom of God. We are wise to be discerning but if we rule out ahead of time because of our stereotyping the possibility that someone of meager means or measure has nothing from God to say to us, we may well be the ones who end up impoverished.

What about persons of a different race than us or station in life, maybe even persons of a different religion or, dare we say it, political stripe? What about persons who have little glitter or shine but labor day in and day out in relative obscurity but with faithful hearts and fervor?

I once knew a pastor like that, now deceased, but I learned more from him than from any other ten pastors put together. Thirty years ago when I was serving a church in Harford County, Maryland, a group of pastors from southern York County and Harford County got together every Tuesday for lectionary Bible study at the church Eugene Peterson served in Bel Air. Among the twenty-five or thirty pastors who gathered every week was an older man named Jack Houdeshel who served the Stewartstown Presbyterian Church.

Stewartstown, Pennsylvania was in those days the rough equivalent of Nazareth in Jesus' day, backwater and nondescript. Eugene had made a name for himself among American Christians through the books and magazine articles he had written and the paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message* that at last count has sold over thirty million copies. But Jack, who mostly was unknown outside of the membership of his modest church, was Eugene's close friend and pastor. Jack probably wasn't as fully appreciated by his own flock in Stewartstown as he ought to have been because prophets often are minimized in their own places. But he so fully

⁶ 1 John 4:1

⁷ Mark 6:6

engaged and embodied the gospel that even well-known people like Eugene were instructed and inspired by the presence of God so obviously alive in him.

Fortunately for me, I have known enough pastors like Jack and humble but steady Christians that for me my stereotypical determination has been reversed to be suspicious of those who are renowned, acclaimed, and celebrated. But at least I know it and can be on guard.

Why does it matter? Why is it important for us to move beyond our stereotypical determination? Because God's acts of grace and power are accomplished through God's word and if our stereotypes keep us from hearing and receiving it because the messenger isn't shiny enough, polished enough, famous enough, or sophisticated enough, or comes from a wrong or familiar place, then we may well miss what God desires to do in us. We cannot afford to be contemporary Nazarenes who do not honor prophets in our own midst or in low places, for it is in such places that Christ mostly lives.

Let us shake loose the "pictures in our heads" that harbor stereotypical preconceptions of who God can use to get through to us. Only then will God be able to accomplish God's word and purpose in us and do deeds of power through us for the sake of us all, and for the sake of the world.

Amen.