

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost; July 7, 2024  
+ Mark 6:1-6 +  
“What is this Wisdom?”

**Jesus left there and went to his hometown. His disciples followed him. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue. Many who heard him were amazed. They asked, “Where did this man learn these things? What is this wisdom that has been given to this man? How is it that miracles such as these are performed by his hands? Isn’t this the carpenter, the Son of Mary and the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.**

**Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own house.” He could not do any miracles there except to lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went around the villages teaching.**

It can hurt deeply to get criticized in front of a group. The old and wise advice, “Give praise in public and criticism in private,” is really just a secular conversion of the Eighth Commandment and the biblical mandate to confront a person with his or her sins in private first.

When confrontations about personal differences happen in front of people we know—particularly friends and family—it can be doubly painful. We’d like to think that those with whom we are close will stick up for us. We hope that they’ll come to our defense in situations when we’re getting picked on.

But experience tells us that isn’t always the case. Sometimes, when we’re being embarrassed, they’d just as soon crawl into the woodwork, too. To silently slip away before the rest of the crowd realizes that they are associated with us. And it’s all because they don’t want to be embarrassed, either.

So, in today’s Gospel, here is Jesus, fresh off His recent *tour de force* of the region around the Sea of Galilee. By any measure, his work was a big splash down at the lake. Plenty of preaching, plenty of miracles, plenty of healings. He’s even picked up an entourage of sorts. Yes, they might be a rather eclectic and scruffy bunch, but they are mostly loyal and mostly dependable.

It seems like everyone around the lake has heard of Jesus. He can hardly move around, there are so many who want to get a glimpse, hear a word, get a little piece of Him. An ordinary man would shout, “Enough!” and flee from the pressure and the attention. But this is no ordinary man.

Just in the past few days, Jesus has accomplished a lot: He’s overcome the devil, in driving out the demons from the possessed Gerasene man. He’s overcome the world, turning the scoffers to shame after they’d laughed at his saying Jairus’ daughter was not dead, but merely sleeping. And he’s overcome the sinful flesh, healing the woman who’d suffered from twelve years of bleeding. That’s quite a week, for sure. Maybe a trip back to Nazareth is in order—the native son made good, returning to bask in the admiration and celebration of his hometown.

From the Sea of Galilee, Jesus heads west to his boyhood home, the disciples in tow. And because of who he is, when the Sabbath comes, the Lord of the Sabbath heads to the synagogue; he goes to church. He doesn’t head for the Galilean equivalent of the golf course, or the swap meet, or the boat show, or stay in bed. When it’s time for God’s people to worship, he physically goes to worship.

And He doesn't just put in an appearance so his mom and siblings wouldn't be embarrassed. Instead, he participates in worship and Bible Study. He even speaks up and teaches the hometown folks a few things. St. Mark tells us, **"Many who heard him were amazed."**

Well, that's a good start. But even there, it only says, **many** are amazed. Not everybody in Nazareth, apparently, is impressed. **"Where did this man learn these things?"** they ask. "This" man because, after all, to them Jesus is just a local boy all grown up. Just a carpenter. Just one kid out of a family of several siblings. And this "man" because...well, just because...that's all he could be, right?

**"What is this wisdom that has been given this man? How is that miracles such as these are performed by his hands?"** they ask. In other words, "What makes *him* so special? He's just an ordinary guy." They got their noses out of joint; they **took offense at him.**

The eternally-begotten Son of God isn't going to take this slap in the face as a fatal strike, but it still has to sting. They are rejecting him. They're still turning away from the Word of God in the flesh. They're still sinning, and committing the one sin that, in the end, condemns: unbelief.

I do not really know if embarrassment falls into the category of human weakness and infirmity that Jesus carried during his humiliation. Tiredness does. Sadness does. Hunger does. Embarrassment, I don't really know. If Jesus were capable of being embarrassed, this would have been the time, no doubt. And you know that it has to be awkward for the disciples, and for Jesus' family, too. None of them want him to be rejected, just when he comes home to convey the good news of the kingdom to those who know him well. The honor and respect he should receive is not to be. Worst of all, neither is faith.

Verse 5 tells us that Jesus cannot do any miracles there, except to heal a few sick people. The reason is not that Jesus himself is somehow limited in power or lacks the ability to perform miracles there. Rather, it's a sign that the Nazarenes' lack of faith—which amazes even Jesus—impedes the work of the kingdom. Where there is no faith, the gifts of God remain unrecognized and unrealized.

**"What is this wisdom?"** the people of Nazareth asked. That is, what special knowledge has Jesus received that enables him to perform the miraculous healings and signs that they had heard about? They must be wondering if all that was all some sort of magic trick. *No way* could this carpenter have it within himself to heal people and perform the other signs. Someone must be giving him the secret to do these things. That's the only possible explanation. And why him, of all people? They take offense—because they are envious, and selfish, and hard-hearted.

Instead of thanking God for the blessings of hearing his word and witnessing his power in their lives, they reject him. They elevate their own wisdom, and judge Jesus unworthy of their respect.

Over the centuries, almost all the problems that have plagued the Church have arisen because someone or some group has claimed to have special knowledge or wisdom that isn't available to everyone. Likewise, virtually all of the false religions which draw people away from the salvation offered in the Christ are based on some supposed special enlightenment provided to the select few or to one single person, rather than to all.

How different this is from Christianity, in which we are to trust that God offers salvation in Jesus Christ to all who hear his gospel and do not reject it. We hear St. Peter tell the crowd on Pentecost, **"This promise**

**is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off.”** The atonement of Christ’s death is for all, and the gospel is to be preached to all nations.

But it’s not uncommon for our human wisdom to question the wisdom of God, is it? After all, the gospel makes no sense if we break it down with human logic. There are an awful lot of very worldly-intelligent and successful and respected people who scoff at the gospel and at Christianity. Many of the rich and the famous and the so-called “beautiful people” make fun of us who trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins and our hope for salvation and eternal life. They consider Christians to be fools because we follow an illogical religion—a faith that speaks of salvation by unilateral grace, not by performance of our own works. A faith in which God becomes human, rather than humans aspiring to be gods. A faith in which their God dies for them, not them dying for their god. Just what kind of intelligent person could be a Christian anyway? What kind of fool are you?

It is worth pointing out that often those who mock Christianity are proven fools themselves. For example, Karl Marx, one of the fathers of Communism, wrote that “religion is the opiate of the masses.” He was speaking of religion in general, but in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany the primary religion to which he had exposure was Christianity.

Well, Karl, what about your wisdom? Marx and his philosophy have been shown by history to be failures. Yet much of our post-modern, seemingly sophisticated society want to retain his ideas toward faith—eliminating any dependence on the divine, and trusting in the thoughts and abilities of humanity. *“Live for yourself,”* the world’s wisdom tells us, time and time again. *“Live for today. Do what makes you feel good. Don’t let anybody tell you what to do or what to believe. You are your own god.”* How’s all that wisdom working out now, anyway?

But railing on unbelief and unbelievers and their failed wisdom doesn’t do us much good. Because, fallen and sinful as we are, we also question Jesus’ divine wisdom...time and time again. We listen to the wisdom of hedonism, and so Christians skip church occasionally, missing out on God’s gifts because the god of our body was tired from chasing the god of feeling good on Saturday night. Or we don’t have the time or inclination to study God’s Word, because we follow the wisdom of materialism and focus more on our job to fill our bank account so we can pay for the gods of our car or house or vacation. And we listen to wisdom of narcissism, obsessed with how we look, or what we weigh, or what we wear.

Only God can change a person to see Jesus and his saving gospel as divine wisdom. Take St. Paul, for example. Paul was a pretty smart guy—a real intellectual by anyone’s standards. He went to the best schools, had the best teachers, finished first in the class. He was considered a man who could write his own ticket. And, until he was confronted on that road by Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God, he was pretty full of himself and his own wisdom.

It was after that change that God used Paul to tell the world that all our self-generated knowledge and wisdom doesn’t amount to a hill of beans; to tell us that God does things that appear foolish when viewed with worldly wisdom. But this foolishness is actually the wisdom of how his perfect will works, to preserve and save us—from ourselves and our sin, from the world, and the devil, and even from death itself.

The wisdom Jesus has—the wisdom the folks at Nazareth wonder about and then reject—is not just the divine attributes that enable Him to miraculously heal the sick or do other miracles.

Rather, it's a wisdom that we often don't want to hear: that we and the world are God's creations, not our own. That we are sinful and are doomed to eternal death without a Savior. That we cannot be our own saviors, but that we can only depend on his ability to keep the law; his willingness to sacrifice his life as the atonement for our sins; his resurrection that ensures eternal life. This is why believing the wisdom of Christ requires a miracle from God: it's not about us, at least not about who we are by ourselves and what we can accomplish alone. It's not about our fun, our beauty, our intelligence. The wisdom of God is righteousness in Christ; salvation in Christ; the joy of following Christ to the heavenly kingdom, clothed in robes washed clean by his blood.

With Christ in your heart, you have the wisdom of God, because Jesus and his saving gospel is the wisdom of God. As Paul, that notable convert from human-centered, human-generated wisdom to Christ-centered, Christ-generated wisdom, wrote to those in Corinth:

**Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**

Jesus remains for us the only wisdom that really matters, and the seeming foolishness of the gospel remains the only way in which that wisdom comes to us. Jesus is wisdom—pure wisdom, heavenly wisdom, wisdom beyond our human understanding—because Jesus is the visible expression we have from God about his perfect plan of salvation. He is God's Word of salvation in the flesh. So it is Jesus that we preach; it is Jesus into whose death and resurrection we are baptized; it is Jesus who declares to you, **"I forgive you all your sins,"** and it is Jesus whose body and blood cleanses our souls, strengthens our faith, and provides the medicine of immortality.

Jesus has promised that when we cast aside our own wisdom and trust in him, we can do all things that God wills, and we receive all we need for body and soul. And he has left it to us to speak the truth of the gospel to a world that considers it foolish. We will meet those who accept the wisdom of Christ and love him forever, and we will meet those like the Nazarenes who reject it. The results are not our business. We must remember that even when God's wisdom is rejected, it remains God's wisdom. His truth is objectively true, and human rejection does not unravel it. Jesus says: **"I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."**

Finally, then, we need the continual bolstering of God's wisdom for our lives, so that we may resist the lies, and the temptations, and, yes, the foolishness, of a perishing world which has come to believe it has all the wisdom and answers. We depend instead on the wisdom that comes from God's Word, the wisdom that comes down from above, the wisdom that *is in* Jesus Christ, and that *is* Jesus Christ. And this I pray for you, the people of this congregation, as Paul did for the congregation at Ephesus:

**I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.** In Jesus' name. Amen.