

“And they took offense at him...And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. He was amazed at their unbelief”

Jesus was having hard time back in his hometown. When he taught in the synagogue he astonished his listeners who then began to question what he was saying not on the content but on who he was.

Should we be amazed at their unbelief?

Apparently familiarity does breed contempt and we are frequently unwilling to see someone we have known for a long time exhibit unfamiliar behavior, even when that behavior should have positive consequences. Unfamiliar behavior threatens the status quo. I remember a social worker once telling me that in a family system in which there is an alcoholic who stops drinking the system does not always adapt well, in fact his or her family members may subconsciously want the person to go back to drinking because it disrupts the dynamics; the spouse who is used to rescuing the alcoholic from the consequences of his or her actions, the children who have triangulated with the non-alcoholic parent against the alcoholic parent and can't accept the adult who now behaves consistently and wants to engage. Moreover the family system no longer has the alcoholic to blame for its problems and so the members may turn on each other.

Certainly Jesus was disrupting not only his family system but the relationships of his family with the rest of his hometown. No wonder they took offense at him. Jesus was successful, he was doing something that was unexpected and beyond their ken.

And this rejection by his townsfolk had had an impact on his ability to be effective, to do those deeds of power. But that seems a bit weird doesn't it? Jesus was the Son of God. Do we really think he needed the support of believers to do the work that he had been given by his Father in heaven?

Many years ago I used to teach a course in Project Management that focused on communication and we would do an exercise called “Listening Grants the Speaking.” The insight to be gained from this exercise had to do with the impact of a listener's behavior on a speaker, any speaker. I am sure we have all had the experience of trying to say something only to discover that the person or people with whom we are speaking are not paying attention. You might have been telling a story, sharing a piece of good news or a deep feeling, or even trying to contribute an idea in a meeting. But you do not feel heard. If you felt passionately about what you were saying you might have started to talk louder, over the sidebar conversations, or in the face of someone who doesn't seem to be paying attention. Or maybe you started to talk faster because you sense the other person's impatience and wanted to get it all out before they turned away. Or perhaps you started to dramatize with hand gestures or other body language in order to engage your listener's interest and when that didn't work either you found your words faltering, your speech slowing down, and then maybe you just stopped talking and no one even noticed you had never finished what you were trying to say. Or maybe you lost the point, or forgot the punchline, or didn't get support for your idea. It hurt, didn't it? You felt devalued as a person, you were trying to share something important to you and it was not received. So then how do you communicate with this person or these persons the next time

you need to say something? You are already, compromised, suppressed by your previous experience to the point where you might not even feel like it was worth trying to say anything at all.

I think you can see where this is going. It is the listener that has the power in a conversation. So Jesus must have felt when he was rejected by his hometown. It's not that the power wasn't there - he was able to deputize his disciples and send them out to proclaim repentance, to cast out demons and to cure the sick. Furthermore Jesus was no snowflake. He was clear with his disciples that if they were not welcomed, if they were not heard they were to leave and shake the dust off their feet. This was no gentle acceptance of rejection, by shaking the dust off their feet the disciples were pronouncing judgment against those who had refused to hear them. They had done what they had been called to do and they were not responsible for people's response to their words and deeds.

Doesn't that fly in the face of our results oriented culture? If your performance was being reviewed by your boss wouldn't you expect to be held accountable for the results? God doesn't quite work that way. For God it is faithfulness that is what counts, faithfulness and obedience. This is the example we have in Jesus Christ himself whose initial ministry had positive results. He attracted followers, performed miracles and was hailed as the messiah in a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. By worldly standards he was a spectacular success – right up until his arrest and execution. But Jesus lived and died in faithful obedience to his Father and so he was raised from the dead ...a success that goes so far beyond worldly standards that much of the world still doesn't hear or see it that way. We who have heard are responsible for witnessing to our faith and God will take care of the rest...isn't that what we learned from all those parables about the sower and the seeds?

But people are more than seeds that cannot control their growth, people are responsible for their reactions to the Good News, both then and now, which brings me to the second part of this Listening Grants the Speaking Exercise. The listener who refuses to hear misses out as those who rejected Jesus missed out. When you pay attention to someone you are drawn into relationship with that person. Your acknowledgment of the thoughts and feelings behind their words by nodding, or grunting, with facial expressions, or other body language creates a connection that can actually enhance the impact of the speaker's words.

This is why prayer is so important. When we pray with words we open our hearts to God. We usually think of prayer as what we say to God. We praise God for who God is, we thank God for the blessings we receive, we ask God for forgiveness, we offer ourselves to God, we ask for God's help on behalf of ourselves or others, and we worship God in community with corporate prayer. God listens and sometimes we hear and receive God's response in the moment and at other times it only becomes apparent to us much later. Mostly we do a lot of talking to God. Sometime we don't leave much space for God to answer because of all the noise about our wants and needs whether for ourselves or for others. But the other side of prayer is being still and listening to God. In our prayer book this is called adoration where our focus is on being in God's presence. This is hard to do because most of us have several tracks running in our minds at once and it seems inefficient to slow everything down to one track, especially one track that is non-verbal. Remember how the bishop encouraged us to spend more time with

God? This is a reminder to do so. The best thing we can do in order to develop our capacity to listen to God is to spend some alone time with God each day, to create the space and silence necessary to hear that “still small voice”. As I have said before this kind of prayer takes practice, regular practice.

Our relationship with God is a two-way street. If all we do is talk it is no wonder we have difficulty hearing when God does answer us. Remember “Listening really does Grant the Speaking.”

Amen