

# *“A Hometown Prophet”*

*Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time*

*II Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10, II Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens  
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, the 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 9, July 8, 2018, dedicated to all the prophets emerging from the streets of this nation, to Kevin Jones as he heads for vacation and sabbatical, to our amazing choir as they head for their mission to England and always to the glory of God!

*“A Hometown Prophet”*

*II Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10, II Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13*

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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Cities and towns have shaped the nature of life in this world for thousands of years. Some of us come from big cities and many of us have grown up and come from small towns. In today’s passages from II Samuel and the Gospel of Mark, we encounter two of this world’s greatest leaders – King David and Jesus of Nazareth – and their interaction with the places

they call home. We see two models of men. Two models of leaders as well.

David is extolled as a Shepherd King while Jesus is presented as a Prophetic Leader. How do we gain strength and direction for leadership and followership from our scriptures?

The Shepherd is one who guards, feeds, nurtures, serves and protects the flock. In II Samuel 5, David is named and claimed by God and set apart for leadership to care for God's people as a "Shepherd King." Moreover, David is set apart as a "Good Shepherd," that is the Shepherd who exists for the sake of the sheep and their well-being and as such is willing to lay down his life for them. A bad shepherd is one who acts as though the sheep exist for the wellbeing, enhancement and profit of the shepherd. Although he starts (and ends) as a "Good Shepherd," David will demonstrate "bad shepherd" qualities when he abuses his leadership causing the death of Uriah is faithful general after stealing Uriah's wife Bathsheba because of his lust for her. But, as II Samuel 5 opens, this Shepherd King is good. The qualities we are shown in this first glance of King David are qualities to be embraced and followed in serving others.

Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Gospel of John names and claims to be the ultimate "Good Shepherd," has a much rougher time

offering his prophetic leadership in Mark 6. He has been out in the towns of Galilee teaching, healing, and performing God's miracles. He has gathered quite a following everywhere but Nazareth. In our passage, we catch-up with him on his return trip to his hometown. Unlike Taylor Swift who visited our fine city and drew 80,000 people to Ohio Stadium last night, Jesus is not a superstar when he walks into the dusty little town of Nazareth.

He comes to his hometown and the local folks of his childhood synagogue are **astounded and offended** by him. Really? Astounded AND Offended?

They are **astounded** that the carpenter, the son of Mary, the sibling of James, Joses, Judas and Simon and his un-named sisters has much at all going on. That family and their oldest son didn't seem to amount to much in Hebrew School. He couldn't even hold the notes to common tunes of worship at his Bar Mitzvah. **Astounding...** Who knows? All we have now are unfounded rumors...

Beyond his background, his training and his questionable familial pedigree, these small-town folks in Nazareth are **OFFENDED** by him. A better translation is this – they are “**scandalized**” by him. He was “**too much for them**” (NEB). You might say, they simply “rejected him.” You know what

they are talking about! This is that response people make when they can't believe something good can come out of your family or mine.

**And here come the put-downs.** They say, *“You’ve got to be kidding. Something good came from Mary’s illegitimate birth as a teenage girl? Where did this boy get his smarts? How did he become such a “wise man” having grown up as a “wise guy?” And where did he get these healing hands?”*

You see, in their minds, Jesus comes from the wrong side of the “sheep path” (if you know what I mean). They have always thought this carpenter was “one nail short” (if you know what I am talking about).

Some people think the community pushing back on Jesus is actually a sign of respect and faithfulness. The people of God honor Jesus with argument. There is something to that. But, I am not buying it... I think they are threatened by his growing reputation and unnerved by his prophetic success and esteem by others.

**Face it - Jesus is no Hometown Hero in Nazareth.** And he has a great response. **Jesus knows “WHO HE IS”** and to whom he answers and belongs. Grounding himself in the prophetic tradition, he names himself as a Prophet of God. And as such, he declares prophets are not without honor –

EXCEPT – in the following places – “in their hometowns, among their own kin, and in their own house.” Wow! He totally “disses” the people who have just “totally dissed” him. They throw thrown him under the bus.”

He is absolutely amazed at the unbelief of folks in his hometown. It is actually THEIR UNBELIEF which sets up a situation where he cannot do any deeds of power there (except...Mark tells us...he did lay his hands on a few sick people and cured them. They must have been new to town and didn't “know” the kid or judged him as Mary's son). You can say he meets with mixed-reviews. But, let's be honest, we all meet with mixed reviews. Some people love us and some people hate us. It is the way the world works. The real question becomes: What do you do with the reviews you receive? Do they sink you? Or do you rise and shine in a new way – perhaps in a new place?

I like what the Gospel of Thomas says on this topic of a healing prophet returning home: *“No prophet is acceptable in his village; no physician works cures on those who know him.”* Conclusion: Prophecy and Healing have a hard time taking root at home. How true!

In this regard, think of Norman Maclean's A River Runs Through It. As Norman speaks of his own lack of ability to

help his alcoholic/gambling brother and his own family, he writes, *“So it is that we can seldom help anybody really close to us. Either we don't know what part to give or maybe we don't like to give any part of ourselves. Then, more often than not, the part that is needed is not wanted.... And even more often, we do not have the part that is needed.”* He concludes, *“It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us.”*

Isn't it true? Too often we can't help the people closest to us. Too often, the part of ourselves that we would give to those who love and know that is most needed is not wanted. A friend of mine said it well... *“I absolutely will lay down my life for my children and those I love deeply. But, I will not let them kill me.”* And so, too often, they elude us.... And Jesus' hometown folks elude him as well.

As Jesus leaves the judgmental, unhealed elusive ones in the tight little community of his childhood, he heads out to other villages. In surrounding towns and villages, folks are receptive to Jesus. **THEY HAVE FAITH.** There, he heals. He teaches.

He even sends his 12 disciples out to heal and teach as well. As a prophetic leader, he has learned some valuable lessons. You see, away from the confines of his hometown, Jesus heals – but he also empowers and guides those closest to him to do the same. As he sends his disciples, Jesus tells them to leave all

their baggage back home. I take this as a literal travelling tip as well as a good Counseling advise to his co-healers. Travel light. Carry no bread, no bags, no money, simply the clothes on their backs. Enter homes, be with people there. If they accept you, stay. If they reject you, move on – after shaking the dust off your sandals.

Let me say a word about “shake off the dust” and move on. Through my 33 years of ministry and my 60+ years in the life of the church, I have seen and heard too many pastors use this expression – “shake off the dust and move on” when leaving behind a church and town or city. I sometimes wonder if it is used too lightly or too blithely.

Having said that, there are times in our ministry and life, when we have been treated badly by some or many in our communities of faith and life, and we need a new start. If you ever find yourself in that place, take off your sandals, shake off the dust (if you get a chance, wash off your feet, too) and then move on. It is liberating and cleansing. In essence, that is exactly what Jesus does in this passage. He never returns to Nazareth. He goes where people are open to him and welcome the gifts he brings. Good bye Nazareth! Hello everyone else!

Jesus is not only a prophetic leader, he is also a **servant leader**. As a servant leader, he develops followers who end up walking beside him and learned from his gifts of servant leadership. In his book Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness, Robert Greenleaf writes of David and Jesus and other great leaders. He says, “*A Great Leader is seen as a servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness.*”

**The Hometown Anti-Hero of Nazareth** is going to be just fine. He has ten qualities of servant leadership. I have developed these from Greenleaf’s writing as they reflect the spirit of Jesus. I simply list them here (but time does not allow for deeper digging).

1. **Jesus is Compassionate.** He is always attentive to people and their needs.
2. **He is committed to Ministry over Structures.** He doesn’t care about the trappings of organization but seeks to provide delivery systems for ministry.
3. **He is giving and inspires good giving and a life of stewardship in his followers.**
4. **He is a great listener.** He listens to God and people. He seeks to discern God’s will for his life.

5. **He is honest and straight-forward in assessing people and situations.** Enough said...

6. **He is unhindered by cultural trappings and temptations.** In other words, he doesn't really care what you think about him. He will be who he will be.

7. **He embodies prophetic imagination.** He wants his followers to question and speak out; to never stop seeking, growing and expanding their worldviews and faith views.

8. **He is a man of prayer.** He is able to withdraw to gain new strength and insight.

9. **He is persuasive** – sometimes to the crowds and most importantly, one person at a time.

10. **He is Holy Bold.** To be bold is beautiful. To HOLY Bold is divine. A holy bold person shakes the dust off and moves on. But, a “Holy Bold” person never cowers or hides from the truth of God which is within them.

In the end, Jesus really is a “hometown prophet.” Whether or not he is embraced as one, whether or not they have built a statue in his honor, he is a hometown prophet. He is also a servant leader. As we seek to follow our Savior, we should remember we are following the master of servant leadership. And in so doing, we are called to be servant leaders, too. Amen.

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