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Year B Proper 9
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
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St. James, St. James

Gospel: Mark 6:1-13

"You're kidding me!" I said to the Postal Clerk when he told me how much the Care Package was going to cost to send to my daughter the grad student in New Mexico. The price was \$8 more than the previous year's package to upstate New York where she had done her undergrad work.

"The price is based on weight and distance" the guy patiently explained. "If you use a Medium Flat Rate box, you'll save \$5". He pointed to the display of boxes in the back of the Post Office.

"Can't you just give me that rate with the box I already packed?" I asked. He said no, that the box had to have the proper label on it to get the lower price. Mulling my options, I took back my package, went to the display and pulled out a Flat Rate box.

Standing at the counter in the back, I put together the Medium Flat Rate box, then went to open up the one I came in with to move the contents over. That one was simply labeled 'Mailing Box' and was also medium-sized. Just before I opened it, I gave the sizes of the two boxes a closer look. "It can't be this easy" I thought to myself as I gently pushed the expensive-to-send carton inside the Flat Rate Box. With a little coaxing, the care package, still inside the original carton, fit inside the Flat Rate box. I sealed the edges.

I brought the now heavier double carton to the counter, where the guy rang up the fee, \$5 less than before. All because of a label.

You can't make this stuff up.

As a society, we label things. We label people. Some are good labels, some not so kind. Some are influenced by prejudices of the ones interpreting the label.

Jesus experienced this prejudice when he returned home for a visit after starting his ministry.

Jesus had been traveling back and forth across the Sea of Galilee, healing the sick, teaching. When he came back home the initial reaction of the people was of wonder: 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands?' His reputation for healing, and his teaching, astounded them.

They reminded themselves of the label they had for Jesus: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?”

Mark refers to Jesus as the son of Mary, which indicates Joseph has died. Jesus was 30 when he began his ministry, was this because he stayed home to help raise his siblings after the death of Joseph? The people of the town would be seeing Jesus through the eyes of those who thought they knew him best: they saw him as the little boy who played, skinned his knees, grew up among them. A working man. They knew his family. Everyday people. Labels. Mark tells us the humanity of the townspeople set in, and they “took offense at him”.

Jesus was surprised at their reaction. ‘Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house’ He replied to them. Familiarity breeds contempt. They had two ways to see Jesus through their label: familiarity breeding contempt, or familiarity breeding respect for his growth and maturity. They choose the former. Their inability to see the growth, to see the man Jesus had grown into, prevented them from receiving the gifts Jesus had for them, and Jesus could only heal a few. It’s important to note that Jesus wasn’t powerless to heal, it was the unwillingness of the townspeople to see beyond their label interpretation that made them powerless to receive the gift.

I recently had a personal insight to why the townspeople reacted that way. I was challenged outside my comfort zone, placed in a situation where I was asked to speak with a network news reporter. Later that evening, in talking to my adult daughter over the phone, I shared my initial resistance to the experience, how uncomfortable I had felt. I repeated a directive the Bishop had given me: I was to go out of my comfort zone and take risks, but this wasn’t what I was thinking of. Her reply was that I had to get outside that zone. Somewhat petulantly, and still reeling from the experience, I asked why?

She replied: “Your comfort zone is essentially a limit you place on yourself. Eliminate that demarcation and the world is yours.”

There was a lot of wisdom in that advice. I now found myself struggling with the fact that my daughter had said this to me. My child, the one who called me for advice. My child was still my child, yet she was a mature adult who had wonderful insights and wisdom to share. I went beyond my label limiting how I saw my daughter, and see my child as the adult she is has grown to be. Actually, we are both still growing.

Rejected, Jesus sends out his disciples, giving them the authorization and the power to heal and cast out demons. Mark includes these two stories to answer some basic questions of the

early church: Why didn't the Jews, who knew Jesus best, see him as the Son of God? Where did the disciples get their power from: themselves or God? We can use these lessons to learn about how we see others through the labels we give them.

At our Baptism, promises to God are made on our behalf by parents and Godparents; later on we declare these on our own at confirmation:

- Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
- Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

We promise to God we will look beyond the labels society, or we, have put on a person. Labels based on a person's skin color, gender, age, where they were born, their occupation, education, where they live or how much money they have.

We are to seek the face of Jesus in those around us, stranger or someone we've known for their entire life. When I was teaching a Summer Vacation Bible School lesson on who our neighbor was, one of the kid's declared he loved all his neighbors. When I pointed out his younger brother, who he had had a loud disagreement with that morning, was also considered a neighbor, he declared: "He's not a neighbor! He's just my brother!"

Reflecting on the post office label scenario later on, I realized I'm guilty of relying on labels at times when I meet or interact with someone. I'll judge that person, consciously or unconsciously, based on a label I or society gave them. In limiting the way I see them, I'm missing seeing them as God sees them: a child of God, with the face of God, with grace and wisdom to share.

As Christ's disciples in the world today, we are sent out to do his work. Our personal response to someone can either block Jesus' healing power, much the way his townspeople blocked Jesus; or we can open the door to healing, and let the work of Jesus be done.

It's not easy, and can't be done on our own. With the help of Christ, may we seek Christ in all persons.

