

Assumption, Presumption, Dysfunction
Reading from the Old Testament: Jeremiah 20:7-11a
Reading from the Gospels: Mark 6:1-13

For folks of my ... ahem ... vintage, one of the more memorable scenes in the history of television would have to be the impromptu performance of Jim Ignatowski in the the fourth season of the sitcom *Taxi*. Ignatowski, or Iggy as he was known among the other cab drivers, had been an aristocratic childhood genius whose mind was fried from his overindulgences in the counterculture of the 1960s. Spaced out and congenially absurd with a most tenuous link to reality, you never knew what would come out of his mouth. He once recalled that during his lost days in the Sixties, he was traded from one commune to another for two goats and an unspecified Donovan album.

In the episode entitled *Elegant Iggy*, Jim is somehow designated to accompany a fellow cabbie to a hoity-toity cocktail party where his colleague is hoping to connect with an arts patron to further her quest to be an artist. She is nervous about what faux pas Jim might stumble into that would cancel her efforts and is thus horrified when Iggy volunteers to fill-in for a pianist that canceled at the last minute. Iggy gamely sits down at the piano and starts playing London Bridge is

Falling Down with the proficiency of a first-grader at his second piano lesson, haltingly stabbing at notes with little success. The guests are appalled, his colleague wants to disappear, and frustrated, Jim throws up his hands, says, "Aw, the [heck] with it," and immediately launches into a flawless rendition of *Fantaisie Impromptu* in C# minor, by Chopin. It was a true I-had-no-idea moment.

We pay a hefty price for the knowledge, edification, enlightenment, and enrichment we fail to absorb when we dismiss someone based on the assumptions and presumption we bring to our encounters with them. We assess, underestimate, adjudicate, ignore, or reject, so sure of our own discernment and so righteous in our opinions.

The explosion of social media and our addiction to our screens have fostered an environment where opinion is valued more than truth and tribalism has supplanted civil society. Put it this way, if you've already made up your mind before the movie even starts, your review cannot offer a fair assessment, and your experience will be jaded with presumption. If you presume a class, a program, a trip, a ... ahem ... sermon will be a waste of time, guess what? Ha! Ha! You'll probably be right, not because the content has no value, but because you've

padlocked your brain and thrown away the key. Arrogance is most often a sign of ignorance, not intelligence. Certitude is kryptonite to spiritual growth. Presumption is toxic to community.

Though Jesus was from Nazareth, his early ministry in Mark's gospel is centered in Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was in this area that he called his first disciples and began his public ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. By the time Jesus ventured back to visit his hometown of Nazareth, some thirty miles inland, his public profile had grown and word of his teaching and signs, therefore, preceded his arrival back home. It was enough for him to be offered the privilege of speaking at the synagogue of his childhood. The hometown folk seemed intrigued by the notion of one of their own making a name for himself.

Maybe you have been tendered that invitation to perform or speak before the homies with whom your parents have been regularly sharing news of your adventures, accomplishments, and exploits. You cross paths with one of them at Bojangles and don't manage to escape before being approached by the dude from the Kiwanis Club or the teacher of your parents' Sunday school class, "Say, I heard you were coming back

to town. Word is, you've taken up the guitar and become pretty handy with a song. How about playing a couple of tunes at our Kiwanis meeting this week, or maybe leading a few hymns for the Sunday school class?"

They see it as a privilege given. You feel it as a reason to buy a roll of TUMS. You may have established your place in your chosen field, confidently making presentations before corporate boards or singing solos in grand urban cathedrals or teaching at a prestigious university or speaking before crowded auditoriums. But this? This is something wholly different.

The hometown crowd may have heard about your accomplishments, may have seen news stories touting your sterling reputation, but in their eyes, you are still the 14-year-old who dropped the cymbal during *O Little Town of Bethlehem* at the middle school band concert; the 8-year-old who tripped into the cereal display at the grocery store. That's your fourth-grade teacher smiling out there; and over there is the art teacher that sent you to the principal's office; and behind him is the assistant principal who was waiting to meet you there to mete out your punishment; and aren't you so lucky that in the third

row is your old neighbor whose mailbox you ran into the day after you got your driver's license. Any gravitas you've established elsewhere doesn't apply back home. Some may have come to see if you freeze up like you did at the 5th-grade speech contest, or to remind you about the long list of foibles and indiscretions from your youth.

We worship a Jesus fully divine **and** fully human. And so, if Jesus is truly God with us, feeling what we feel including our full spectrum of emotions, I have to think he regarded the privilege of the pulpit at his hometown synagogue with a measure of ambivalence. Their invitation did not imply a desire to be edified, nourished, challenged. No, like celebrity judges in one of those ubiquitous talent shows, the congregants in Nazareth's synagogue were there to evaluate, judge, confirm assumptions, and measure the man Jesus against the boy Jesus they remembered him to be.

They certainly weren't sitting before Jesus looking for truth. As with most people, they lived rather comfortably and confidently with the illusion that they already had a firm grasp on the truth, on what is good (their worldview) and what is bad (everyone else's worldview). But here's the problem. Do you remember Genesis 3? When the human

resisted the serpent's encouragement to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the serpent said, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." It wasn't the fruit, but the arrogance and presumption that precipitated the Fall. We like to play God, assuming our opinions are the same as God's will.

It's the fatal flaw we share completely, dividing the world into good (us) and evil (them), living and dying under the illusion that we own the truth. Living in the sway of that illusion, we render ourselves incapable of learning, understanding, growing, loving. There is no time left for learning, for growth, for transformation because all our energy is spent justifying our worldview, holding tight to our opinions, attacking all opposition, demeaning any who see things differently, forcing peers, families, friends to agree or risk excommunication. It all contributes to that most taxing and futile effort to force God into the box we have labeled God.

So, a wary Jesus begins to teach, and initially the folks from the old neighborhood offer some of the typical observations thrust in the direction of young folks returning home. "My, how he has grown." "He's

surprisingly poised for a young feller." But first impressions are fleeting under the spotlight of public scrutiny. I recently heard about an interview at one church where the hiring team was texting one another with snarky comments about the candidate while the interview was still going on. And you know that if the technology had been available, fingers would have been flying in Nazareth's synagogue, particularly upon the realization that the kid was actually going to try to teach them something. Hometown pride evaporates quickly in the heat of conceit.

These folks think they raised him and were scandalized at any suggestion of role reversal. "Who does this guy think he is?" "He certainly doesn't have any valedictorian speeches on his resume. He was busy trying to make napkin holders out of pine scraps down at the vo-tech school." Carpenter ... Sheesh. Couldn't even make a go of it So now he has the nerve to think he's going to teach us something?" "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?"

Notice that there is no mention of a father here. Some scholars have suggested that was intentional, a sign that the rumors surrounding Jesus' birth were still plaguing Mary, questioning her

virtue. Small towns tend to have long memories. Thus, Mark observes that the hometown folks were scandalized by the notion of Jesus claiming any moral authority to teach them anything. Thus, Mark says that Jesus could do "no deed of power there" in Nazareth.

A Declaration of Faith states, "In the presence of Jesus, who lived out what God wants us all to be, we were threatened beyond endurance. Blinded by our rebellion against our Creator, we killed his Son when we met him face to face."

I read this week that "the human capacity for investing in social norms, for believing in one's own preferences, is greater than the human capacity for faith," (Mark Edington, *Feasting on the Word*) and very often more important than truth. Wherever truth is perceived as a threat because it challenges our self-image, our opinions and convictions, we are lost. As Anne Lamott says, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty."

You kind of know you are reading an important book when you get to the end and realize you have highlighted almost the entire text. I recently finished the Samuel Wells title, *Walk Humbly*. It's a little book

stuffed with profound, deep thoughts. Wells has served as the Dean of Duke Chapel and is currently the vicar of the St. Martin in the Fields parish in London. He observes that, typically, "there are three answers to every question: 'yes,' 'no,' and 'it depends' – and the answer is nearly always 'it depends,' because you can arrive at the clarity of 'yes' and 'no' only by excluding all additional information. But that additional information is what makes up the stuff of life – relationship, context, history, possibility, likelihood, surprise, accident. To exist is to depend – to be contingent – to be part of that additional information ... We're always subject to unforeseen circumstances, liable to unexpected alterations, inclined to unpredictable outcomes. The question is not, 'How can we not depend?' The real question is, 'How can we depend on the right things?' In existence there is no such thing as certainty. The opposite of chance isn't certainty: it's trust. Life isn't about excluding chance and establishing certainty: it's about identifying what, whom, and how to trust." (Samuel Wells, *Walk Humbly*)

Imagine being in that synagogue in Jesus' hometown, when Jesus, himself, God incarnate, steps forward to teach, and imagine being so comfortable with our opinions that we easily dismiss what he has to

say. Well, we don't have to imagine because that is exactly what we do every time we presume to own the truth. When we presume to be spot on, clearly in the right, the steward of truth, dismissive of difference, the defender of the Divine ... you know, the jerk nobody wants to sit next to at the family reunion ... we may generate plenty of drama, but we won't speak truth and we will not reflect the Christ we claim to serve. Wells says that "truth can only begin with taking in the enormity of that banquet of which you are only the tiniest ingredient."

Jesus didn't send the disciples out with the sledgehammer of self-righteousness. No, Jesus sent the disciples out with just some small notion of what love looked like and felt like and asking them to share it with others just as he had shared it with them. Thus, faith sharing isn't about being right, or always being equipped with an answer. Faith sharing is about opening conversations with others on the precipice of mystery. Love takes care of the rest.

Perhaps Walt Whitman's appreciation of the scientist would have been a helpful perspective for the folks in Nazareth. It remains a helpful guide for us: "I like the scientific spirit—the holding off, the being sure but not too sure, the willingness to surrender ideas when the

evidence is against them: this is ultimately fine—it always keeps the way beyond open—always gives life, thought, affection, the whole [person], a chance to try over again after a mistake—after a wrong guess.” (Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman's Camden Conversations*) The know-it-all knows nothing. The humble spirit learns who to trust. Amen.