

Lectionary 14B 2018, July 8, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Of all Lancaster's native sons and daughters who have achieved fame and notoriety, in my opinion Charles Demuth is surely one of the most interesting. His paintings hang in some of the best museums in the world, including the Whitney Museum and Museum of Modern Art in New York City. He grew up here in Lancaster on East King Street. Graduated from the Franklin and Marshall, studied art in Philadelphia and Paris. He is known for his watercolors of flowers and garden scenes, many of them painted from his room and in the garden of his mother's home on East King street next to the tobacco store still bearing his families' name. Later in life he began a series of oil paintings of factory buildings here in Lancaster. They belong to a school of art he helped found called Precisionism, paintings of the American industrial landscape marked by precise, sharply defined, geometrical forms.

Charles Demuth died at age 52 in 1935 here in Lancaster. He suffered from diabetes and was never in very good health. Even though he lived in New York, for months and even years at a time he convalesced here in Lancaster. It was during this time he painted his famous works of factory buildings. Only now, long after he died, that Lancaster has embraced him as a native son. While he was still living many of his fellow Lancastrians regarded him as a flamboyant, suspiciously immoral person. After all, he went off to study art in Paris and associated with other avant-garde artists. One painting in particular highlights how he thought of Lancaster. It's a depiction of a grain elevator with a chimney and factory in background, a wonderful example of this style called Precisionism. The title he gave the painting is "My Egypt." Demuth clearly identifies himself as living in exile, in a kind of bondage much as the Israelites lived in slavery in the land of Egypt.

The gospel reading this morning also tells us of another native son who received less than a hero's welcome when he returned home. When Jesus came home after a triumphant tour of healings, casting out demons, teaching to crowds of people, his fellow Nazarenes didn't give Jesus a ticker tape parade down main street, the reporters didn't cover the story for the Nazareth Gazette, the mayor didn't give him the key to the city and no one named a park or a school after him. Quite the opposite. Most people in the town have a hard time reconciling the young carpenter they thought they knew with the wise, authoritative healer and miracle worker he had become.

It seems Jesus didn't fulfill the expectations others placed on him. They couldn't see anything but what they had always known; a young man schooled in his father's carpenter shop. Most people from Nazareth stayed put. Hardly anyone went off to the big city of Jerusalem to study theology. And if they did, they rarely ever returned home.

Jesus' friends and family could only see him for what he was while growing up, a perfectly ordinary boy and young man. Nothing special. Certainly not what many were beginning to whisper; "he is a miracle worker," "he is the wisest teacher," "he may even be the Messiah." The good townspeople of Nazareth couldn't see Jesus for who he was. They could only see what they expected to see. And then Mark records what has to be some of the saddest verses of the New Testament, "And Jesus could do no deed of power there...and he was amazed at their unbelief."

Jesus repeats a proverb he applies to himself: "Prophets are not without honor, except in their own hometown, among their own kin, and in their own house." So many were familiar with Jesus they couldn't believe what others were saying about him. It's almost as though they were mumbling among themselves, "Who does he think he is, going off and leaving his family behind,

leaving his brothers and cousins to work in the family carpenter shop, supporting his mother, while he goes off wandering the countryside? Has he forgotten who he is, and what his obligations are?"

Jesus defied expectations. Nowhere does that seem to be more true than among those who knew him best. And because they could not or did not choose to see, Jesus could do no works of power among them. People you might think would be among the first to follow him end up being left behind. So our account ends, "Then he went out among the villages teaching." According to Mark's gospel Jesus never returns to Nazareth. It's as though he practices what he tells his own disciples when they are not received openly, "shake the dust off your shoes and move on."

So, we might ask ourselves this morning, "Are we like those who think they know who Jesus is?" It's not as though we have never heard the story, never heard of the carpenter, never heard of Jesus. In many ways we might just be like his family and friends, having grown up ourselves, mostly, knowing much about him. Are we like Jesus' hometown friends and family, thinking we are too familiar, unable to see and hear the invitation to follow in lives of commitment and discipleship?

But notice something else in this story. Mark tells us, almost as an afterthought, that even though Jesus could do no great deeds of power, nevertheless "he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." To me this is another example of how Jesus goes about defying expectation, even our own. We often say that our faith is a requirement for Jesus to be able to do anything extraordinary in our lives. We usually say, "You must believe in order for the healing, the miraculous, to happen." But one of my favorite authors, Frederick Buechner, turns that around. He says faith doesn't allow the extraordinary work of God to happen so much as faith allows us to see the work of God in our midst. Jesus will do his work, of healing, of extraordinary love, whether we believe it or not. Faith is the opening of the eye, the opening of the heart, to the work of God that is already there.

Jesus may have marveled at their unbelief. Jesus may sometimes marvel at our unbelief as well. Yet Jesus still goes about his ministry, reconciling us to God, granting us grace, pointing us in the direction of the coming kingdom of God, being that very kingdom in our midst. We are invited to recognize that work, give thanks to God for it, celebrate his presence in his hometown, among his brothers and sisters. Faith isn't requirement for Jesus' work, but it does allow us to see the presence of God who is always among us in the first place. Amen.