

“Learning to Fall”

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One of the most momentous occasions in a child’s life is when the training wheels are taken off their bicycle. After having relied on these wheels for stability as they are learning to ride a two-wheeler, now for the first time they are challenged to keep the bike upright. While parents are usually standing by for this moment, it is up to the child to ride the bike without any assistance, balancing on those two wheels as they pedal it forward. It can be both an exhilarating and frightening day in one’s childhood.

But before the training wheels are removed, there’s one lesson that a neophyte cyclist needs to learn: how to fall. Falls are inevitable on a two-wheel bicycle; the challenge is how to fall safely, without causing harm to either oneself or the bike. It not a question of *if* a cyclist will fall; it’s a matter of learning *how* to fall and then how to safely get up and get back in the saddle. Learning to fall is as important as learning to ride without training wheels.

While the bicycle wouldn’t be invented for centuries, in a sense Jesus is preparing to take the “training wheels” off and send the disciples out on their first missionary journey on their own. For the first five chapters of Mark, the Twelve have been witnesses to Jesus’ preaching, teaching, and healing ministries. Now in the sixth chapter, Jesus prepares them to go out on their own: *“He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.”* (6:7). Jesus sends them out with the authority to expel demons and preach the good news of the kingdom. *“The Twelve participate directly in Jesus’ own activity of bringing about the rule of God.”* (Pheme Perkins). Before he sends them out, Jesus gives the Twelve detailed instructions governing their conduct as traveling missionaries. The disciples are not to engage in preaching and healing in order to make money; they are to depend on local hospitality:

- “He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, ‘Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.’” – 6:8-10.

As Jesus teaches his disciples how they are to share in his ministry, he also instructs them on how to respond to failure; in a sense, they need to learn how to fall: *“So, no matter how much teaching they’ve taken in, they have to learn to take a tumble – or they will be broken into Humpty Dumpty bits before they leave the gate.”* (Moffett Churn, *The Christian Century*). They need to know how to respond *“if any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you ...”* (6:11).

Jesus knows that his followers will need to learn how to fall, how to respond to rejection and failure, because Jesus encounters this in his own life and ministry. One instance when he must respond to failure happens when he returns to his hometown of Nazareth, where they will discover that *“prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.”* (6:4). The faith of Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman in last Sunday’s Gospel lesson form a striking contrast to the reception Jesus receives in among the people where he was raised; and the Twelve are witnesses to the reality that Jesus *“could do not deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.”* (6:5).

- “Jesus takes the deep-dive approach, bringing the disciples along to observe his own drumming down at the hands of his hometown community. Perhaps if they see Jesus survive a fall from the heights of a rock star bandwagon, the Twelve will learn to take their lumps and get back in the ring.” – Churn.

Ironically, the initial reception Jesus receives in his hometown synagogue is very positive: “... many who heard him were astounded. They said, ‘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?’” (6:2). Jesus’ ministry in Nazareth begins as did his initial ministry in Capernaum; Jesus astonishes those gathered in the synagogue with his teaching and healing: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” (1:22). Readers of Mark’s Gospel might expect an example of healing or exorcism to follow as in Capernaum (“What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” – 1:27); but sadly, this does not happen in Nazareth, for Jesus’ human origins form a roadblock to the belief that should follow from experiencing the extraordinary wisdom and healing power exercised by Jesus. In the same breath that had expressed wonder and astonishment, the people of Nazareth now begin to cast doubts: “‘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?’ And they took offense at him.” (6:3).

A “carpenter” (*tekton*) describes a person who works with wood or other hard materials. Since houses in Galilee were not built entirely of wood, a carpenter would have built door frames and other wooden objects. While carpenters could earn a good living, Jesus’ status as a craftsman would have been considerably lower on the social scale than that of a member of the educated class, who would devote themselves to learning the Torah. Jesus’ place in the social order had been settled at birth, and “villagers commonly resent those who attempt to elevate their position above that to which they are entitled at birth.” (Perkins). The attempt by Jesus’ family to stop his wandering and public preaching earlier in the Gospel (“When he family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind’” – 3:21) implies that from the perspective of the village Jesus was thought to be dishonoring his family. “Jesus’ place in the pecking order was settled at birth, and the shame and honor police would suffer no foolish attempt to rise up ... From the moment he sets foot in town, Jesus is dancing over the fault line.” (Churn).

Another key to the crowd’s negative response to Jesus’ teaching is their reference to him as “son of Mary,” which was neither normal nor particularly positive. It might imply that his father was deceased, or that his birth occurred under questionable circumstances. The brothers and sisters may have been Mary’s biological children or her stepchildren. Whatever the case, “the townspeople were scandalized by the human origins of Jesus, whom they know as a carpenter.” (Perkins).

Because of this negative reception, Jesus’ ministry in Nazareth ends in failure. Since the miracles that cured the hemorrhaging woman and raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead emphasized the importance of faith in those who approach Jesus for healing (“Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” – 5:34), it is not surprising that with a few exceptions, Jesus “could do no deed of power there,” and he was “amazed at their unbelief” (6:6). While the people of the Decapolis were “amazed” (*thaumazo*) at the healing of a possessed man who “went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed” (5:20), Jesus is now “amazed” at the lack of faith in his home village.