

July 4, 2021
Mark 6:1-13

Pentecost 6
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Shake It Off”

“Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.”

What do *Gone with the Wind*, *Moby Dick*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *Lolita*, and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* have in common?

There are all great books that have been enjoyed by millions of readers – and they are all works that were originally rejected by publishers.

It is hard to imagine how such classic works of literature would at first be turned down as unworthy of publication; but it is a reminder that rejection is an experience that is shared by even the most gifted of persons. Many actors have experienced numerous rejections until one director sees their talent and gives them the opportunity to become a star. An all-star baseball player will still fail at least 70% of the times he comes to bat, and many scientists have suffered numerous failures in the lab until one day they succeed in creation of an advance in science or medicine that benefits all of humanity. No one likes to fail, but sometimes it is failure that motivates us to move on to a better future. Failure, as it is often said, can often be our best teacher. Mark’s account of Jesus’ ministry in the first five chapters of his Gospel is an account of success after success. Jesus calls his first disciples, who leave everything behind to follow the man from Nazareth. He attracts large crowds who hear his teachings, witness his miracles, and are amazed that Jesus is sharing “*a new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him*” (1:27). Jesus attracts such great crowds that he needs to preach from a boat “*because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him*” (3:9). When Jesus rebukes the storm on the Sea of Galilee, his disciples “*were filled with awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’*” (4:41). It is not surprising that when Jesus asks his disciples “*who do you say that I am?*” Peter responds without hesitation that “*you are the Messiah*” (8:29). Jesus’ experience in the opening chapters of this Gospel appears to be an endless string of successes.

But that winning streak comes to a crashing halt when Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth. Jesus returns to the town where he was raised along with his disciples, and on the sabbath “*he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him*

were astounded.” (6:2). His ministry in Nazareth begins as did his initial ministry in Capernaum, where Jesus also taught in the synagogue and where the crowd was also “*astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*” (1:22). But when the Nazarenes reflect on who Jesus is in categories familiar to them, their initial astonishment turns to rejection: “*Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?*” (6:3). This is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is identified as a “carpenter” (*tekton*), a word that can be used for anyone who works with wood or other hard materials. Since Galilee was prosperous during this period, Jesus and his family were not impoverished tenant farmers or day labourers. But his status as a local craftsman would have been considered lower than a member of the educated class, who could devote themselves to learning the Torah. Villagers commonly resented those who attempt to elevate their position above that to which they were “entitled” at birth; so, it is not surprising to hear that “*they took offense at him.*” Jesus’ own family had previously attempted to stop his wandering and public preaching: “*When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’*” (3:21). These reactions imply that both his family and his neighbours think that Jesus is dishonouring his family. A further insult may be heard in the crowds’ referring to Jesus as the “son of Mary” rather than as the “son of Joseph,” a more common designation at the time. Such information “*would be a direct insult on Jesus’ character, his honour, in first century culture, hinting at one who was conceived illegitimately. This type of history, with a fatherless lineage, would be “scandalous” to them.*” (Emerson Powery). The result of this rejection is that “*he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.*” (6:5). After a string of great success, Jesus encounters a stinging rebuke in the one place he might have expected to be warmly welcomed as a “hometown hero.”

But while Jesus may have been disappointed at this response, he does not allow it to discourage him or deter him from his teaching ministry. He responds with the proverbial saying that “*prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.*” (6:4). Rather than stay to argue with his own people or try to convince them by further mighty works, Jesus moves on; “*Jesus accepts his own family’s verdict of rejection and leaves*” (Lamar Williamson, Jr.). Since the miracles in the previous chapter of Mark (including the raising of Jairus’ daughter) emphasize 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), the conclusion that Jesus was unable to work many

miracles in Nazareth is hardly surprising, although “*he was amazed at their unbelief*” (6:6).

Jesus’ rejection in his hometown synagogue must have been disappointing to him, but it did not hinder him from moving on in his ministry, for after he leaves Nazareth “*he went about among the villages teaching.*” It may have even given Jesus the inspiration to commission the Twelve for their first assignment, for now Jesus “*called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits*” (6:7). Missionary pairs appear to have been characteristic of early Christianity; many of the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles are of those who practice their ministry in teams:

- “One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o’clock in the afternoon.” – Acts 3:1.
- “When they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” – Acts 13:2-3.
- “But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.” – Acts 15:40-41.

Jesus’ sending his disciples out in pairs may also reflect the legal requirement of two witnesses (“*A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.*” – Deuteronomy 19:15), as well as the dangers of travel at that time.

Before they depart on their missions, Jesus gives them instructions as to how they are to preach and teach in his name. The disciples are not engaged in ministry to make money, which may have subjected them to the charge of being religious charlatans or magicians; they were “*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*” (6:8-9). They were to depend on local hospitality; “*wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place*” (6:10). Jesus also prepares them for the rejection that they will experience from those who refuse to receive the Gospel, as Jesus had experienced such rejection from his hometown synagogue. Instead of allowing such rejection to discourage them or derail the mission in which they have been commissioned by our Lord, Jesus teaches them that “*if any place will not welcome*

you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them” (6:11). Shaking the dust off one’s feet was a gesture of cursing a place; it may reflect the shaking of one’s clothing as a sign of renunciation:

- “I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, ‘So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform the promise. Thus, may they be shaken out and emptied.’ And all the assembly said, ‘Amen,’ and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.” – Nehemiah 5:18.

Paul performs a similar act after he is rejected in Corinth: “*When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes, and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’*” (Acts 18:6). The tradition stands as a testimony before God that the town has refused to hear God’s Word.

- “The gesture of shaking off one’s shoes does not have to mean cursing those who will not listen. It acknowledges the mysterious elements of human freedom. Even the most sophisticated and culturally sensitive presentation of the gospel can be rejected. Christians are not to waste their resources in such situations. Others are waiting to hear the gospel.” – PHEME PERKINS.

The ensuing mission of the disciples is one in which they probably did experience rejection, but also many opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ: “*So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them*” (6:12-13).

There would be many great successes in both the ministries of Jesus and his disciples, but all who are engaged in the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ would also experience rejection by those who refused to accept the message that “Jesus Christ is Lord.” John begins the Fourth Gospel by reporting that “*he came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him*” (John 1:10). This same Evangelist later reports that “*many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with them*” (6:66). Jesus turns to those who remain and asks, “*do you also wish to go away?*” to which Jesus responds “*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life*” (6:65-66). While the early church experienced astounding successes (for example, on the day of Pentecost “*three thousand persons were added*” (Acts 2:41), there were also many failures, one of the greatest being Paul’s

mission in Athens where his preaching is met with a somewhat lukewarm response (“*When they had heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’*” – Acts 17:32). Many of the apostles encountered not only rejection but hostility and persecution because of their witness to the good news of Jesus Christ; Paul talks about his experience with rejection and persecution in his second letter to the church at Corinth:

- “Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.” – 2 Corinthians 11:24-27).

The Christian Church through the centuries has experienced numerous successes, fulfilling Jesus’ commission to “*make disciples of all nations*” (Matthew 28:19). Our Lutheran Church proclaims the Gospel across the globe and has found a very fertile mission field that stretches from Germany and Canada to Tanzania and Namibia. Many congregations here in Ontario have a long history in which they have succeeded in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with successive generations and embodied Christ’s in communities both across the world and across the street. Yet our history is also filled with failures, with occasions in which missions were unsuccessful or where the seed of Gospel proclamation did not find good soil. Many congregations are experiencing crises in which their once-flourishing ministries have hit upon barren times, with their future ability to exist remains in peril. Many of us have experienced the closure of our beloved home churches (a sad day that I experienced on November 1, 2009). But today’s Gospel reminds us that the failures we may experience as God’s people are not unique to our times, nor are they a reflection of our lack of faithfulness to our Lord’s call to be his disciples. Instead, they are a continuation of the challenges, obstacles, and failures that Jesus’ followers have encountered in every age. It is not a matter of whether we will experience failure; it is how we respond to the failures we experience and not allow them to discourage or deter us from moving forward as those who have been sent forth as ambassadors of Christ and the Gospel we proclaim. Paul did not allow the failures and persecutions he experienced to stop him from continuing his mission as an apostle; instead, he encourages the Philippians to join him in pressing forward toward the goal that our Lord and Saviour has placed before us:

- “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus ... let us hold fast to what we have attained.” – Philippians 3:12-16.

The good news that our Lord is proclaiming to us this morning is that *“we are not held responsible for the response to our ministries in Christ’s name, but only for our faithfulness. With such assurance, we can witness boldly and faithfully.”* (Beverly Zink-Sawyer). We are engaged in God’s mission to *“proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light”* (1 Peter 2:9). We are not called to *“Force ourselves on other people or assume responsibility for their decision. It is God’s mission, and it is their decision”* (Williamson). No matter how many failures and rejections we may experience, we live in the blessed assurance that *“as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”* (Isaiah 55:10-11).

In his report to the recent Eastern Synod Assembly, Bishop Michael Pryse encourages us to move forward as a church with hope in the mission into which our Lord has called us: *“We need to engage in experimentation, learn from the experience of others, and overcome our debilitating fear of failure.”* We are moving in uncertain times as we come out of the COVID-19 pandemic into a world that may be vastly different from the one we knew before these difficult times. We may find new ways to engage in ministry, and we may also experience failures in some of our attempts to share God’s Word in new and different ways. But while we will experience failure, we need not allow these failures to debilitate or discourage us. Jesus’ word gives us the grace to “shake it off,” to move on from moments of failure to a future that will offer us fresh opportunities to continue our mission *“to serve in full obedience to our God, to care for all without reserve, and share Christ’s liberating word.”* As those authors did not allow the original rejections they experienced to deprive the world of those classic books, we must not allow rejection or failure to deter us from our fundamental mission: to let the light of Christ shine before others so that they may know the love of God that is for all people through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.