

REMAINING FAITHFUL, EVEN IN THE FACE OF REJECTION

7 Pentecost – B July 8, 2018

Mark 6:1-13

It's been a week of dreams and nightmares—even after I went to sleep at night! But enough about the news.

I was reminded of another dream—actually an extended dream that we know as “The Wizard of Oz,” a movie I've seen for about as many years as I've been alive. One of the first encounters Dorothy has is meeting Glinda, the Good Witch, who transfers the powerful Ruby Slippers of the recently deceased Wicked Witch of the East, to Dorothy's feet. Soon after, we meet The Wicked Witch of the West who tries unsuccessfully to get the slippers for herself. Glinda dismisses her with the words: “Be gone. You have no power here.”

And that brings us to our gospel, where it appears Jesus has virtually no power in his hometown among his own people (except for laying hands on a number of sick people and curing them). From my vantage point that seems rather powerful; but for Jesus, the overall experience is a sign of rejection, because most of the people don't want to hear that one of their own has power and authority that they do not have.

We could write off the people's reaction as jealousy or a stubbornness to believe. It is all of that and more. Human nature tends to see life as a zero-sum game: someone's gain is someone else's loss. That's not a very good outlook on life, but it becomes the template for the way we regard love: even the love of God that we profess to be limitless. Within these walls we might sing: “...red and yellow, black and white: all are precious in God's sight,” but once we get beyond the doors of the church, we doubt that same love can be for everyone. In almost every aspect of life we obsess like jealous children, equating love with how we think we measure up against others. We want to be better, and not worse, than the next person. We draw lines, placing ourselves on one side and some group of “them” on the other side. That kind of thinking has propped up divisions by race, nationality, religion, and gender. It says some are “in” while others are “out,” or some are “winners” and the rest are “losers.”

Of course, we always want to see ourselves as part of the chosen group. Idolatry comes into play when we decide God has chosen us over others; and if believe we are *the chosen* we dare to make decisions about who is and who isn't part of that circle.

Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus was amazed at the unbelief among his own people. They say “You can't go home again,” and I guess that goes for the guy raised by a carpenter to be a carpenter, who comes back to town and into The Temple as Rabbi and Teacher. The initial pride for the local boy wore off quickly, descending into: “Well, just who does he think he is? We saw him growing up; we know his family.”

Jesus could have remained “bummed out” by the rejection of his hometown; but as Jesus usually does, he turns this negative experience into a teachable moment. He gathers up the disciples and sends them out—two-by-two—to preach, teach, and do healing in the surrounding towns and villages. (For anyone who has ever had to do cold-calling or door-to-door selling, you can see the positive, supportive aspect of sending them out in pairs, for mutual support.) He warns them of possible rejection (“shake the dust from your feet...”). But he also gives them some lessons about how to stay there, and that is by packing lightly, connecting with people, and depending on their hospitality.

Now, hospitality in Jesus' time and place was a given in that culture. So how do we translate that to our time and place? It's about relationship. If you're going to be effective as a preacher, teacher, or salesperson, you try to quickly find ways to identify with people, to get to know them, to find out what matters to them. That's in part why lots of business deals are made over a dinner table; and it explains why missionaries usually begin their work by trying to get to know their community and become one with the people, first and foremost. People are more likely to accept you and to listen to you if they see you as one of them (keeping the hometown exception in mind, of course).

Trust is key. If you are authentic, people will listen to you. If you are positive and eager to learn about others, they will respond in kind. A straightforward and positive approach are key. They are key to becoming community just as they are helpful to our own well-being. It is well-established that people who have a positive outlook experience better outcomes when facing disease or when recovering from medical procedures.

We've already heard Jesus talk about how seed planted in good soil will yield a greater harvest. So it is with people being receptive to the Word of God, people who yearn for healing, people who believe that God can work miracles in them. God's grace happens like seed being thrown everywhere. But the seed of God's grace is most likely to be felt when it lands on those who are eager to receive it. Like a farmer or a gardener adding nutrients to the soil, the disciples Jesus sends will witness and bear witness to more of God's goodness when they find common ground to *prepare the soil* and *plant the seed* with their audience.

In Jesus' day, traveling light meant depending on the hospitality of others, which meant that getting into someone's house, living with them, and even depending on them was the stuff of making the ground fertile to receive the Good News.

We live in a different culture, but we can connect the dots. When we treat others with respect, we always have a better time communicating with them. That holds true whether for evangelism or for foreign policy. When we communicate well, with honesty and integrity, we build better relationships. And when we build better relationships, we develop a greater zeal to love unconditionally as Jesus did. We learn to accept others—across the table, across the aisle, and across the community. That's what Jesus did, too. It's the best way to begin, and the best stewardship of the ability that God has given you and the responsibility for which God has chosen you.

Not everyone will respond positively. Jesus knew that. But sometimes amazing things can grow in ground you never thought was fertile; but the seeds you sow are not wasted. They might lie dormant for a while. Some will be honored that you care. And that tiny seeds might be the start of something greater. You might think you have "no power here," but that won't stop God from working beside you and through you. Amen.