

Sunday, July 8, 2018
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 9 (Year B)
Ezekiel 2.1-5; 2 Corinthians 12.2-10; Mark 6.1-13
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Well, that was awkward! Fairly early in his public ministry, Jesus takes his newly called disciples with him to his home town of Nazareth. He undoubtedly wants to show them where he came from. And he has some sense of pride in his hometown, wanting to share it with the disciples. He visits the local synagogue, where the hometown boy-turned-rabbi is invited to speak. The townsfolk have heard about all he has done and want to experience Jesus for themselves. At first there is enthusiasm. "Wow! 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!" And then things start to head south. What they are hearing is a new message. He's challenging them in ways that might be a little uncomfortable for them to hear. They start rationalizing. "Wait! Who does he think he is? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" The initial sense of pride in the hometown boy-made-good turns to discomfort and then to offense when they realize that he is not the same little boy they remembered. "How could that little boy be up there now, spouting this new, radical interpretation of the Torah?" In their "we knew him when" mentality, the people of Nazareth are convinced of Jesus' ordinariness and are therefore unable to believe in what he is teaching, in what he has accomplished. They knew too much about him to take seriously his wisdom and his gifts.

I recall a similar experience a week after I was ordained. I went back to the congregation that raised me up to ministry and had helped support me through seminary. It was Trinity Sunday and I sought to convey my understanding of the Trinity as it had come to be more fully developed through three years of theological education. In my sermon I referred to the Holy Spirit using the feminine pronoun "she." This is how I view the Holy Spirit and there is actually a lot in ancient Jewish tradition to support this perspective. Well, after church, several women who had been very supportive of me throughout my journey to Holy Orders got in my face. "What is this about the Holy Spirit being a woman? You need to forget all that fancy theological stuff they taught you in that liberal seminary and get back to Scripture. And the Bible says the Holy Spirit is a man."

Indeed, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." Because they remembered me "when" they could not hear the challenging message I had preached.

For the people of Nazareth, once the seeds of doubt had been sown, that was it. Because of their lack of faith in Jesus' message, they lacked faith in anything else he tried to do. Their lack of faith even hinders Jesus' attempts at bringing about healing for those seeking it. And so, Jesus is rejected by his own townsfolk. Hard to believe after the stories we've heard the last couple of weeks. How he cast out demons. How he calmed a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee. How he healed various people, including the Woman with the hemorrhage and Jairus' daughter. But alas, it's true. Jesus, the Son of God, was rejected and rendered ineffective.

While the scene in Nazareth might have been awkward, even a bit embarrassing, it illustrates an important aspect of ministry that we don't like to think about. Sometimes we don't succeed. Sometimes those we offer ministry to just don't want what we have to offer. And so, sometimes we are rejected. If it happened to Jesus, it will, at times, definitely happen to us. Perhaps Jesus knew what would happen in Nazareth. Perhaps he specifically took his disciples there so they could observe him failing. To model that "you can't win 'em all" as he prepares to send them out to minister on their own. With his less than stellar performance in Nazareth as a backdrop, Jesus then gives instructions to the Twelve. He gives them instructions that will hopefully increase their chances of succeeding in their own ministries.

In his instructions, Jesus commissions the disciples to go out and proclaim that all should repent. But the message to be proclaimed is more than repenting of sin. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus says "the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mk 1.15). He—and the disciples—are not just preaching a message of turning away from sin. They are preaching a message about turning toward God. They are preaching a message of the good news of God's love, in word and in action.

This first mission of the Twelve is an important reminder that the Church is a community sent out to serve as God's agents in the world. It is a reminder that Christianity is a missionary religion with the commission to spread the work of repentance and healing.

Jesus sends out his disciples two by two. Certainly there is safety in numbers, but more to the point, he is expressing the importance of doing ministry in partnership. Ministry is not a lone ranger activity, but one to be engaged in corporately. Those doing ministry are to do so in a way that provides support for one another. Not only do many hands make light work. Having a partner in ministry adds to the skills and talents of the ministry, increasing the possibility of success. One person may not have what it takes to deal with a particular situation, but one's partner in ministry just might have complimentary skills and talents. And furthermore, working in partnership provides built-in support to celebrate the victories and to provide comfort and consolation in the defeats.

Jesus tells those going out in ministry to take nothing with them. No need for over-packing and trying to plan for every possible condition. This was a time when hospitality to traveling strangers was the norm. It was expected. There were no Motel 6s or Best Westerns, so travelers relied on the hospitality of strangers to provide lodging and food. This was particularly true for those on holy missions. But aside from the practical matters of where to eat and sleep, Jesus is really telling his followers that not only are they to rely on the hospitality of strangers, they are also to rely on God. When engaging in ministry, we are to just take ourselves. Our witness is enough. What we need—what we truly need—will be provided by God or by those we seek to minister to. In engaging in ministry, we are asked to be vulnerable, to be dependent on the reception of others, and to depend on God's grace.

Jesus tells his disciples "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place." In other words, give it a real try. Don't go running at the first sign of resistance. Don't go running when things get a little bumpy. Ministry takes perseverance, persistence. Sometimes it takes a while to get through, to make progress.

And finally, Jesus tells his disciples that if they do reach that point when it is obvious that inroads are not being made, when they are not being received, when they are being rejected, they are to “shake off the dust that is on [their] feet as a testimony against them.” Shaking dust from one’s feet is a traditional Jewish gesture that opposition to God’s message would not cling to them. That if someone does not receive what is offered, it is no reflection on the ability of the messenger. The one rejecting bears responsibility for not being open to accepting what is offered. When we are rejected, all we can do is shake the dust off our feet and continue on in search of someone who does want to hear the Good News and experience it in action.

This is also another way of telling the disciples—and us—that we not may always succeed. It goes with the territory. Those who are called into ministry—and we are all called into ministry—sometimes are rejected. And we’re in good company. We see this not only with Jesus in Nazareth but also in both the Old Testament and Epistle readings for today.

In the story of Ezekiel, the people have rejected God, so he sends the prophet Ezekiel to proclaim a message of repentance. Ultimately, Ezekiel himself will be rejected by the people he is sent to minister to. But as God tells him in today’s lection, “Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.” Whether we succeed or fail is not the issue. It is about our faithfulness in doing what God has called us to. And if we have been faithful, we will leave our mark. We may never know how we truly affect those we encounter in ministry. Sometimes, our job is to plant the seed that others nurture and bring to fruition. Sometimes, others plant the seed and we contribute to the care and growth. And sometimes we may even produce results. Regardless, none of what we do in ministry is futile or in vain. For it is God alone who truly produces the results. We are merely God’s partners in ministry.

And in our reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul has been rejected by a portion of the Corinthian Church, who feel he does not have sufficient spiritual experience to minister to them. In response, Paul talks about a significant spiritual experience he had to illustrate that he does indeed meet their qualifications. He goes on to note that the basis and success of his ministry is not in his capabilities and qualifications but in his weakness and vulnerability. That our weakness and vulnerability allows space for God to use us and fill in the gaps. To allow space for God’s power to work in and through us.

While Jesus faced rejection and the inability to complete his ministry while in Nazareth, he uses this experience to guide his disciples and us in what it means to engage in ministry. To poise ourselves to be successful in ministry. Ultimately, it is not about us. We are called to be faithful to the ministries we engage in. We are called to be vulnerable and open to allow God to work through us. We are called not to be guided by fear of rejection or failure, but instead to faithfully follow the call to proclaim the Gospel in word and action. We are called to allow our own lived experience of God’s love and mercy to speak for itself. When we faithfully live into this calling, working in partnership with God and one another, we find that God is able to accomplish wondrous things with and through us.