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The Dusty Sacrament: Mark 6:1-13

Most theologians would agree that the two stories in the gospel today – Jesus’ visit to his hometown and his commissioning of the twelve – are both about the choice we make of acceptance or rejection of Christ or someone representing him. That is what I assumed I would be writing about. But the day I began my preparing for this sermon I saw both as stories about failure. Maybe it was the mood I was in... but I don’t think that this is too far off the mark.

Jesus has been experiencing a string of successes before this portion of the gospel. The calming of the storm, the healing of the demon-possessed man, the raising of Jairus’s daughter. He now is returning to his hometown, with disciples, as a rabbi, having done miracles... and he is rejected. He fails to win over the small town that he grew up in. Where his mother and at least some of his siblings still lived, he is rejected.

Then Jesus calls his twelve followers and sent them out, but first with these very specific instructions about what to do if they are refused. Before they even left Jesus’ side, Jesus prepared them to fail. He told them what to do.

There had been a longstanding practice for Jews returning from Gentile lands - shake off pagan dust as a gesture of cleansing and contempt. When the disciples shake off the dust of an unreceptive village, they are declaring that village pagan—announcing God’s judgment on that village—washing their hands of further responsibility for that village (Guelich, 322-323). The

gesture frees the disciples to move to more (hopefully) fruitful fields and signifies that this village failed to be converted to the Jesus movement.

I imagine the apostles dusting themselves off after leaving a town – literally, shaking off the dust – good riddance! Towns that failed to follow them and the teachings they brought with them – good bye!

The townspeople failed to join the movement.

Or the disciples failed to convert them.

Jesus provided his disciples with what one commentary referred to as “the sacrament of failure”. He said, basically, “Shake it off and move on”.

I don’t think he was sending out his disciples to fail, but I think he was showing them how to carry on in the face of failure. And that is good news for us, because if you have lived for more than a couple of years or tried to accomplish anything, you have experienced failure. And just because we are Christians or going into the world in Christ’s name, we are not insulated from failure. And we shouldn’t fear failure.

Failure can lead to something better.

It can be the closing of one door that leads to another, better, more appropriate door. I was in love with a boy who moved to Oregon. I, of course, wanted to follow him. I took a stack of resumes and went west. Knocked on doors. Had a few interviews. Nothing. Nada. Came home, leaving the boy behind, and within about two weeks I was offered an amazing job in a Christian based shelter, an amazing apartment in the same neighborhood, and I met my husband.

Shake off the dust and move on.

Failure keeps us humble.

Comments like “I’ve never failed at anything I’ve really wanted” and “I can accomplish anything I put my mind to” are for the very young and those with little life experience. It is not possible to not fail. Perhaps we fail because we need to be reminded that we can’t go it alone, that we need community. Perhaps we need to be reminded that we are not the expert on everything, even if we are SURE we are.

Shake off the dust and move on.

Failure may put us back on the right path.

Consider a time when you tried something – a job, a relationship, a project, and then realized that it wasn’t quite right. That it didn’t fulfill the need like you thought it would, didn’t make you happy, didn’t solve the problem.

Shake off the dust and move on.

Failure makes us aware of our ego.

Perhaps failure made you look at your assumptions, your world view, your privilege, and realize that you were coasting through, assuming that everyone sees the situation as you do, not recognizing other beliefs or needs.

Failure makes us question our faith.

Often the message from the well-known preachers includes promises of health, happiness, wealth, and all good things if only you work hard for Christ. If only you believe enough. If only you pray properly, treat others right, go to church, tithe. If you follow the commandments and read the bible, then things will work out.

Do you believe this? Deep down, do you believe that you are not good enough? That some failure in your past keeps you from really being a part of this communion? From being in communion with God and with everyone

else? Do you keep some secret from coming to light because you fear being judged, or rejected, or ridiculed?

Shake off the dust and move on.

To those of you who have failed, I say "Welcome to the world!" To those of you who have failed, but are carrying on anyway, walking in faith, I say "Welcome to communion!" We are all broken, mistaken, fearful people who are ego-driven narcissistic humans.

Practice the sacrament of failure Jesus taught his disciples. Shake off the dust and move on.