

Reality Check

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Joint Worship: Bloor Street United Church at Trinity St. Paul's

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Reading:

Mark 6.1 – 13

He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and 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! 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 offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 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. 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.' 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.

As the lectionary takes us through the Gospel of Mark, we find ourselves today witnessing a bit of a bump in the road for Jesus and the disciples. They are coming out of a period of extreme success in their ministry and mission, as they go from one amazing moment to the next. Even though the disciples often don't quite get it, they've really been living in the Kingdom. Jesus has preached and listened and healed and laughed - and as we heard a couple of weeks ago even the wind and waves obey him. Jesus has shown that the power of the love he is telling them about commands the spirits too, as he casts out a legion of demons from the sad lost souls among the tombs at Gerasene. Beyond these wondrous acts, Jesus has modeled a whole new life and a different way of relating - remember last week, while the powerful Jairus, leader of the synagogue, falls at his feet begging for his child's healing, Jesus himself bows to an aging, marginalized woman, and marvels at the power of her faith. Reversals abound. They've been having a great time. It's the Kingdom alright. The realm of God. They have been on a roll, but today it comes to an end, as they enter Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. Reality check.

As we hear the stories of Jesus in his hometown and the disciples on their first foray into the field without him, we are conscious that we are hearing on many levels at once. The author of the Gospel of Mark was writing for the record, as it were - he was recounting stories of what had happened when Jesus walked the earth. And we hear that. But he was also shaping those stories in such a way as to help his own contemporaries in the early Christian community, to understand the challenges of their situation and to respond to that reality. He wanted to encourage them as they set about sharing the amazing story of a new reality breaking into the sad old empires and sinister systems of domination that they lived in. That reading is especially clear in this passage, with its instructions on both the physical and the emotional aspects of the hard tasks of mission.

The words ring down through the centuries too, and address us in our daily lives, as we too meet both success and setbacks in the work we

are called to do, as we encounter the sad old empires and systems of domination that we live in.

For the most part, these passages are about anger, and what to do with it. When you have something wonderful to offer, and it just isn't taken up, it is natural to feel angry. Jesus in Nazareth, faced with the sneers of his erstwhile neighbours (and probably half of them are his second and third cousins), is shocked - amazed in one translation, surprised in another, he *marvelled at their unbelief* in the King James version. Yet, uncharacteristically for a miracle worker and holy man who never otherwise hesitates to take on the authorities, Jesus more or less sucks it up. He is a model of equanimity. Oh well, he seems to say, this is what always happens. *Prophets are not without honour except in their hometown, among their own kin, and in their own house.*

Impressive to see how disempowering their scorn is, how disdain interferes with the flow of spiritual wholeness, and *shalom* – even Jesus can only heal the odd sick person. The pain of that. Not so much anger perhaps, as grief.

For just as Walter Brueggeman points out, underlying the prophet's anger about injustice is grief - grief at hard-heartedness, grief at the sense of being misunderstood, perhaps willfully misunderstood. The heavy burden of grief on the prophetic soul of Martin Luther King Jr. led him to bouts of depression. Same with Mother Teresa of Calcutta. In the verses from the prophet Ezekiel that Marie read, even God is perhaps more grief-stricken than angry at the rebellion of the people.

What Jesus was trying to tell those cousins of his that day was not about the wonderfulness of him, but the wonderfulness of God. He wasn't looking for adulation, but for joy in the sharing of a new truth. But do they hear him? Not a chance. It's a crummy day in Nazareth.

Canadian researcher Pat Thompson in her work on vocational renewal for non-profit leaders, emphasizes the importance of telling stories

about the leaders we are becoming through the work we do. Jesus in the stories we read today is both the pattern and the tutor for other would-be prophets.

Whatever dismay he may be feeling, whatever combination of anger and grief Jesus may be experiencing, what he does is to take a step back. Jesus is the picture of what Ed Friedman calls the differentiated leader – the one who remains connected, yet a little detached. A non-anxious presence in an anxious system. Stay relaxed, he says, and don't take it personally. That slight disengagement, the repositioning in a larger context, is what he also recommends to the disciples as they set out on their own journeys.

If any place will not welcome you, and they refuse to hear you, says Jesus, don't take it too much to heart. It's the kind of advice we hear from the old patriarch Joseph Kennedy, too, when he apparently advised his high-flying sons, 'Just do the best you can', he said, 'and after that, the hell with it'. Jesus tells his followers much the same thing, in the idiom of the day - remember you have other towns to visit, and just shake the dust off your feet. Remember that your piece of this mission we are on together is a small one – you can't control their response, but you can show perseverance, by moving on. Remember the bigger picture.

I would think that almost everyone in this place can think of a time when the sheer frustration and discouragement of a stalled social justice or ministry commitment seemed to take away all the energy you had. All the power. Maybe you are there right now. [Take a moment to call it to mind]

The best-known contemporary expression of Jesus' advice today is attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. He certainly had experience with the kind of reality check that stops us in our tracks.

*It helps, now and then, to step back
and take the long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of
the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.*

*Nothing we do is complete,
which is another way of saying
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.*

*No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No programme accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.*

*This is what we are about:
We plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.*

*We cannot do everything
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders,
ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.*