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*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 offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honor, 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.*

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We all like to win. We love for our team to beat the other. We want our political party to win on election day. We want to win the debate. We like to be right. We seek to be successful.

All this is well and good; it’s human nature, I suppose. Without that drive, sports wouldn’t be a lot of fun. Goodnatured competitiveness can be a catalyst to better ourselves and, at our healthiest, build one another up! But when we turn the totality of our human existence into a zero-sum game, we become rather nasty towards one another. It's not what Jesus would have us do. It’s *not* the kind of movement he led and is leading.

So the big thought I hope we’ll ponder together this day is this: **much of who we are as Christians is revealed not in what we choose to do when we win, but what we choose to do when we lose.** And in today’s passage, Jesus and his disciples begin to lose.

Last week’s passage - the verses just prior to today’s text - was nothing but winning! In chapter five of Mark’s gospel alone, Jesus frees the Geresene man from the grip of his tortuous demon, heals the woman who had been taken advantage of financially for 12 years by so-called doctors who made empty promises to heal her chronic hemorrhage, and resurrects a 12-year old girl whose testimony we imagined together last Sunday.

But in today’s passage, Jesus’ win streak comes an end. The fireworks of chapter five fizzle out and Jesus hits a brick wall.

You know the feeling well, I would guess. Everything’s going your way, you’re firing on all cylinders, you're hitting your stride and then….WHAM!! The power line work on Battleground brings you to a screeching halt. A stupid and now thoroughly inebriated fly ruins your summer chardonnay. A kid (not your own!) who decided to poop in the pool forces it to close down for 30 minutes, and then you go to get your 2 and 4 year old a snack at the snack bar only to realize that it’s cash only.

Truth be told, all these setbacks I mention are, in the grand scheme of things, rather minuscule, even if our reaction in the moment is usually decidedly disproportionate. The setbacks Jesus encounters are of far more significance.

For reasons Mark doesn’t seem to think we need to know, Jesus takes his disciples to his hometown. But there is no fanfare, no ticker-tape parade, no marching band playing “We Are the Champions.” Instead, Jesus returns to his old stomping grounds to find his hometown neighbors skeptical and dismissive. The NRSV tells us that they “took offense” at him, which is probably a pretty tame translation. They shut him down faster than a bat out of hell! Their remarks varied from the dismissive: “The carpenter’s son think’s he can come all up in here telling us our business?” The belittling: “Jesus, I remember when you were in diapers!” To the cruel: “You better get out of here before you meet the business end of my shotgun!”

Jesus, the text tells us, is astounded at his hometown’s lack of belief. Mark’s gospel explains what happened after with a quite blunt verse: “And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.”

It’s a quite anticlimactic and depressing segue from the back-to-back-to-back triple victories of the previous chapter. On the one hand, it says something quite remarkable about the miraculous deeds of God and that’s this: to at least *some* extent, the success of God’s miracles depends on our openness to them. That, in and of itself, could be the topic of several sermons. But I want to focus today not on *why* Jesus was unsuccessful in his hometown but instead *on how he responded to this failure*.

Let’s take a moment to acknowledge how Jesus *didn’t* react:

* He didn’t shout over them or try to be the loudest voice in the room.
* He didn’t condemn them, insult them, or dehumanize them.
* And he didn’t use the rejection as a PR stunt.  
    
   Instead, Jesus *did* do two things that today’s text makes perfectly clear:
* He helped the few people who were open to his healing, and
* He moved on and ordered his disciples to do the same.

Of those two things he *did* do in response to his ending win-streak, I’d like to focus on the second. He moved on and ordered his disciples to do the same. Jesus devises a plan to send his disciples out in pairs to continue the work that he has modeled for them. To this point in the Gospel, Jesus has been the main “worker.” It’s largely been the disciples’ job to observe, listen, and learn. Now, Jesus says, it’s their turn. He gives them the authority to do the miraculous things that he has done which, I’m sure, resulted in no small amount of trepidation on the disciples’ part!

But then he gives some more concrete instructions as they go about their sojourns.

* **Take nothing but a staff, a pair of sandals, and the clothes on their back. NO bread, NO bag, NO money.** This forces the disciples to not only be the dispensers of hospitality but the *recipients* of hospitality as well. Many of us in the church love to be the givers of hospitality but become profoundly uncomfortable when we’re asked to receive it. I suppose it’s about control, or privilege, or both. But to me, this instruction is Jesus’ telling his disciples that Christian hospitality is a two-way street. Christian hospitality must never be wielded in a fashion that keeps the privileged in their comfort and the marginalized in a dehumanized light.
* **If you find rejection instead of welcome, shake the dust from your feet and move on!** This is the instruction I want to unpack for us today.

This particular line appears in all three of what we call the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and has been interpreted in some rather arrogant ways. Many Christians have interpreted it with a bloated sense of self-righteousness as kind of giving the “middle finger” to those who oppose them. Knowing the rest of the life and teachings of Jesus, I somehow find it unlikely that Jesus meant his instructions to be interpreted that way. To be sure, there are times in our lives when the healthy choice is to walk away from an unhealthy situation, or relationship, or ideology. And that choice is seldom an easy one. Setting appropriate boundaries is vital, and difficult work, and such might be one faithful interpretation of this passage as long as it doesn’t lead us to arrogance or self-righteousness.

**Instead, by instructing the disciples to shake the dust from their feet and move on when they encounter rejection, Jesus is making a strong contrast to how the soldiers of the Roman Empire acted in similar situations.[[1]](#footnote-2) The Roman Empire ruled by coercion and force, plain and simple. In instructing his disciples to move along when they find rejection, he’s giving a clear mandate that he and his followers do things very differently.**

If the Romans didn’t get their way, they went to battle. If someone said no to them, they were thrown in jail or taxed into poverty, or both. Jesus, in today's passage is saying clearly and without conditions: we do things differently. We do not coerce. We do not manipulate. We do not force our beliefs down anyone’s throat. Instead, we shake the dust off our feet and move along to the next place, trusting in God enough to resist the temptation to act like Empire.

There’s been a popular quote circulating the internet the past few weeks that is very appropriate to today’s passage. It’s by Rev. Benjamin Cremer and says the following: **“One lesson that we Christians have not learned in the past 2,000+ years is that Jesus had no political control over the Roman Empire and he still changed the world. We keep trying to change the world the way the Roman Empire did, instead of the way Jesus did.”**

Which means, friends, that we need to talk about so-called Christian nationalism and why it is such a danger to our country, to the Church, and to our neighbors. What is Christian nationalism? “Christian Nationalism is a cultural framework that believes Christianity should occupy a privileged position in the public square. As such, this framework seeks to impose by force a narrow interpretation of Christian values upon all of society, regardless of religious preference or lack thereof.”

A dramatic example of such a dangerous ideology is a law passed in Louisiana a few weeks ago requiring the public display of the 10 Commandments in each and every public school classroom in the state. When signing the law, Governor Jeff Landry said, “If you want to respect the rule of law, you’ve got to start from the original law giver, which was Moses.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Y’all, I have nothing against the 10 Commandments. I do my best to life my life in accordance to their wisdom, God’s wisdom, even if and when I do so rather imperfectly. But there’s a difference between me trying to live my life in accordance to their wisdom and me forcing my neighbor to do the same. And that line is being crossed in new and alarming ways all over our country. That line is crossed each and every time we stop acting like Jesus, and start acting like the Romans.

Now please hear me, y’all: being Christian and being patriotic don’t have to be mutually exclusive. I’m *not* saying we shouldn’t be patriotic. I’m *not* saying that we shouldn’t be proud of our country. I’m *not* saying that we shouldn’t give gratitude for, and respect toward, the brave people of our armed forces. Hear me, Church: there’s a definite line between healthy patriotism and Christian Nationalism. One leads us to neighborliness and the other to unneighborliness. And in today’s passage from Mark’s gospel, Jesus is very clear which side of that line he expects his followers to inhabit.

Let us return now to the “big thought of the day”: **“Much of who we are as Christians is revealed not in what we choose to do when we win, but what we choose to do when we lose.”** Y’all don’t need me to tell you that there’s a growing secularism in our country. Y’all don’t need me to tell you that many in the younger generations have given up on the institutional church (many, for the record, for very legitimate reasons). Y’all don’t need me to tell you that mainline Christian denominations in this country are in rapid decline across the board.

And that has caused many Christians to fear. I count myself among them. It’s ok if you do, too. It’s not a sin to be scared. But it *is* a sin when we react to our fear in ways that hurt our neighbor. Jesus doesn’t call us to *mandate* what we believe in his name; he calls us to *model* what we believe in his name. And there’s a *big* difference between those two things!

And I also want y’all to hear this: I don’t think that those who believe in Christian Nationalism are “evil” people. I wish not to vilify individuals but rather, as your pastor, offer a *biblical* critique of an ideology that is spreading across this great nation of ours. Because, in my observation, it’s an ideology that comes from a place of fear that threatens the witness of the Church, the wellbeing of our neighbor, and the strength of our democracy.

When Christians face rejection, when our message falls flat, when everything we do to be faithful leaves us feeling like we’re in a “weaker” position than before, Jesus gives us a challenging notion about how we define things like “strength” and “weakness.” In a very subversive way, he challenges us to rethink those definitions in terms quite foreign to those in the halls of power.

The “strong” thing to do, in Jesus’ definition, is *not* to force our ideology down anyone’s throats. Instead, we are to shake the dust off our feet and do what the disciples did at Jesus’ command: keep feeding, keep healing, keep sheltering, keep advocating, keep peacemaking, keep serving. And, you know what? You don’t need to post the 10 commandments in a public school classroom to do any of those things in Christ’s name.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**

1. With much gratitude to Ched Myers’ groundbreaking commentary, "Binding the Strong Man.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/19/us/louisiana-ten-commandments-classrooms.html?searchResultPosition=3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)