

“How Would Jesus Fail”

Many of you may remember the comedian Rodney Dangerfield, but do you remember his signature line? Yes, it was “I can’t get no respect.” After which he would go on to tell a story where he was the target of a joke or put down that was humiliating in the extreme. It was not hard to believe he could be such a target. He cultivated the look of a loser. He was a bit disheveled. His eyes seemed to have a permanent look of surprise, wonder and startlement. His brow was always furrowed and his voice had a bit of a whine and sense of permanent complaint.

Jesus, on the other hand, has received lots of respect among local populations around the Sea of Galilee until he returns home to Nazareth. There people look at him like the carpenter he was and remember him among his brothers and sisters. Their remarks about him are somewhat annoyed and annoying. There is a sense that he has gotten too big for his britches or as another southern saying goes, “He has gotten above his raising.” Jesus is so put out that he responds to the hometown crowd quoting a well-known aphorism of his day, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.”

No matter who you are it can be hard going home. Perhaps you remember the first time home after fall semester in college. I know I was so full of new and exciting learning I wanted to share it with everyone. But for the most part they were not interested. It either was not new to them or they did not have the context that made the new information and insights compelling.

This can be especially true when our information challenges someone’s long-held beliefs. For example, you might remember the scene from the Gospel of John where Phillip having encountered Jesus rushes to tell his friend Nathaniel that he has met the Messiah. What does Nathaniel say in response, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

I suppose even people who lived in Nazareth had a low opinion of their town and what was possible to come out of their midst. While others in surrounding towns could appreciate Jesus’ skill as a preacher and teacher and were awed at his healing powers, the Nazoreans were dismissive. Their lack of belief was so powerful it seemed to stunt Jesus’ ability to perform healings there.

This disappointing encounter is followed quickly by Jesus sending out the apostles in pairs to preach, teach and heal. It might have been good for the apostles to see what happened to Jesus in Nazareth. Otherwise they might have had extremely high expectations for their ministry.

Indeed Jesus warns them not to get their hopes up. He instructs them to dress simply and not to take provisions. Better they were to live off of the kindness of strangers. That way they had to go into the towns even if their prospects were dim or they were feeling shy. Eventually hunger would catch up with them and they would have to take a chance. Second they were to stay with the first people who offered hospitality rather than hopping from home to home looking for a better meal or more comfortable lodgings.

Most importantly they were to do their best, but if the people of the town did not listen or appreciate their teaching and preaching, the apostles were to leave and

shake the dust off their feet as they did so. I think this was less a sort of in your face insult to the town, and more about leaving behind the experience and move on without looking back.

That is what Jesus had to do with Nazareth. His homefolks did not receive his witness and teaching. Jesus could let that get to him and go back to being a carpenter, the guy they expected him to be. Or he could as the song goes, "Take a deep breath, pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again."¹

This is not a light thing to do even if you are the Son of God, perhaps especially if you are the Son of God. Jesus may well have expected the hometown crowd to have been excited to see him come home and share his ministry with them. He may have thought that the new things he was learning about God and himself were especially important to share with his family and friends. These were the people who nurtured him and taught him. He wanted them to share in the Good News as much as anyone, but they rejected the message because the messenger was not special to them. It was undoubtedly a good lesson for him to learn, because Mark notes that, "Jesus was amazed at their unbelief."

Where is the Good News in all of this? I think it may well be that if Jesus did not always succeed in getting people to understand the rich and promising Good News of God we have permission to fail as well. In my Sunday School we were taught that Jesus was our paradigm. We had to strive to live as the perfect child of God. Perhaps if we had learned that Jesus sometimes failed it might have been less daunting to follow him. And if we had learned that Jesus set realistic goals for the apostles we might have felt the Christianity was not a losing proposition given that we knew our shortcomings.

What's more it is important to know that no matter how hard we try, no matter how convinced we are of our mission, no matter how much we believe, we are not responsible for someone else's belief. If they refuse our help, our compassion, our wisdom and learning, it is no one's fault. That is just the way people are and that includes every one of us. For we all have missed the point at times. We have all turned down good and helpful advice, just as we have been turned down.

We follow the way of Jesus and knock the dust off of our sandals and head out for greener pastures, not holding onto hurt, disappointment, or anger, but holding on to hope for the next town and the next encounter knowing Jesus is with us all the way "unto the very end of the age."²

¹ "Pick Yourself Up" lyrics by Dorothy Fields, music by Jerome Kern 1936. From the movie "Swing Time."

² Matthew 28:20