

FREE FALLING

This morning, we hear about Jesus' arrival in his hometown. You would think there would be a grand parade, marching band, and crowds of admirers as the hero returns to the town of his childhood. Not quite. Things start out looking good: He heads to the synagogue and preaches a sermon that appears to impress folks but it quickly becomes clear that folks are concerned Jesus has gotten too big for his britches. Listen to how Eugene Peterson retells the story:

He left there and returned to his hometown. His disciples came along. On the Sabbath, he gave a lecture in the meeting place. He made a real hit, impressing everyone. "We had no idea he was this good!" they said. "How did he get so wise all of a sudden, get such ability?" But in the next breath they were cutting him down: "He's just a carpenter — Mary's boy. We've known him since he was a kid. We know his brothers, James, Justus, Jude, and Simon, and his sisters. Who does he think he is?" They tripped over what little they knew about him and fell, sprawling. And they never got any further. Jesus told them, "A prophet has little honor in his hometown, among his relatives, on the streets he played in as a child." Jesus wasn't able to do much of anything there — he laid hands on a few sick people and healed them, that's all. He couldn't get over their stubbornness. He left and made a circuit of the other villages, teaching.

You will note, Joseph doesn't even merit a mention. It's as though Jesus was raised by a single mother along with his siblings — step-siblings? Mark isn't clear about this.

In some ways, the cold shoulder Jesus receives from his neighbors isn't all that surprising given the way honor and shame worked in peasant villages in that time. One's role and status in the community fell within a designated "pecking order" and there was significant resistance and resentment arose when folks tried to move up social ladder beyond their acquired status at birth. I imagine we've all had a taste of that experience if perhaps in less extreme form, sometime in our lives. Those moments when you realize your family or friends have determined who you are, and no matter how hard you try they're not interested in letting you out of that box. In High School I had a great bunch of friends that I hung out with it but as we headed into our senior year I was ready to be somebody different, to play a different role in the group to upend expectations and grow beyond the assumptions about how I was and how I related to folks. My friends were having none of it, and one of the great blessings of leaving town for college was the freedom to start afresh with new friends who had no preconceptions of who I was or who they thought I was supposed to be.

Regardless of Jesus' celebrity status elsewhere he was still just that carpenter guy from down the street. So, Jesus' hometown visit was quiet a flop. As Mark states, "... he could do no deed of power there..." You would think after this experience Jesus would be ready for a break, to head off to a quiet place for some time alone. You really couldn't blame him if he wanted to mope a bit, go nurse his wounds, or even have a pity party. But that's not what happens next. After Jesus crashes and burns in his hometown he has the gumption or chutzpah to gather the 12 and send them out to do likewise: to enter communities where they may or may not be welcomed to share a message folks may or may not wish to receive.

Great timing. It would be like showing up for an inspirational sales training with a supposed charismatic speaker who completely fails to connect with the audience and then being told, “Yes, you can do this, too! Now, get out there and meet your sales quotas.” Before being called into ordained ministry, I was in sales – insert your sales is like ministry joke here. I remember being at district sales rep. meetings when all the hype was about how many sales folks had closed in the last week. It was encouraging and exciting to hear about the success of others who seemingly just waltzed into customer offices and closed the sale every time. Nobody talked about the number of “cold calls” they had to make in order to merit but one sale; the daily rejections by phone, in person, with the front office as well as the loading dock. The numbing number of times you heard, “No thanks, we don’t need anything.”

I think all the fuss about church growth is similarly deceptive. Sharing the gospel, evangelizing – isn’t easy. I’m always suspicious when I hear stories of miraculous church growth. Sure, it does happen, but there is usually a lot more to the story than what is reported. Behind churches that truly experience sustained growth and spiritual health there are typically all sorts of programs and ideas that did NOT work before the congregation discovered what connected with their community.

Before you can walk, you’re going to fall a few times. In our lesson this morning, probably the most important lesson Jesus teaches the apostles before sending them out to spread the good news is that sometimes you’re going to fall. When you do, shake the dust off your sandals and keep going, try the next house, or next village. There is great need in this world for the good news, keep at it until you find a receptive audience. I remember visiting my grandparents when I was about 7 and my grandpa teaching me how to ride a pony he had. This was not a horse – but a good-sized pony. I started out bareback and all was going well until the pony decided to go a bit faster and I fell off. I wasn’t bucked off – just bounced off and I landed hard and the wind was knocked clean out of me. After that I was all set to give up ponies and horses for life but my grandfather was having none of it. He picked me up, still crying, and put me right back on the pony. And things were fine. And to this day I have no fear of getting on a horse. It’s not the fall – it’s what you do after you’ve landed.

Unit COVID shut it down I was a regular at the Friday Noon Open Mic at the Woodshed Lessons Studio. As I have occasionally noted – it’s my other church. I went for the sense of community. I went for the amazing music. I went because it was a safe place to fall. Friday after Friday I listened to some incredible music and I also witnessed folks – often very accomplished musicians trying out something new, pushing their limits, starting a piece multiple times redoing a passage that didn’t go as planned. I’ve watched folks fall and fall again, and then just keep on going. And you know what – rather than undermining my stuttering steps as a musician, it’s actually encouraging. We so often see only polished performances in this conservatory town. We forget all that goes on behind the scenes. The hundreds of times a piece is played in practice before it is publicly heard. We also can lose sight that it is not the promise of perfection that is being offered, but the gift of a musical offering, not necessarily by extraordinary gifted musicians with amazing innate musical talent but regular folks, just like us, with a passion for sharing something that provides joy and meaning to their life.

That's the incredible truth revealed in today's lesson. Jesus, for all his divine nature, was an ordinary person. If you met him at a dinner party you wouldn't see a halo but someone you could approach and talk to. And this carpenter guy, changed the world. He changed the world because he wasn't afraid to fall. He knew God would catch him. We, God's unconventional, unlikely servants, are similarly called: to spread the good news, to seek receptive ears, to offer the gift that we have received confident that when we fall which we will, over and over again, God will be ready to catch us, dust us off and send us off and out again. There are ears waiting to hear and receive this news even today, even in this town. Let us set out together.

AMEN