

“Shake Off the Dust and Go On”

Sundays after Pentecost

Mark 6:1-13

July 5, 2009

Two weeks ago I was out painting an picture at Crystal Cove. As I was working on my painting a man walked over to look at the progress of my work and as he did we he made a comment. The comment had a philosophical tone. That comment led me to make one and within a few short minutes we are talking about life, struggles we experience, etc. I told him something that I had not thought about in years.

In college I had a design teacher. Ms Merk was her name. She taught at Mt. San Antonio Jr. College. Her comment to us in class was “You must destroy in order to create.” What she meant was that when working on a painting, a drawing, a design, it is often when we over work it, add too much, try one more thing, etc that we end up ruining the painting, drawing, or design. But in so doing we also receive new insight to a better picture, the right design, that for which we had been searching. It was in the failing, in the struggle that success, a new picture emerges. We had to destroy to create. In life, in the Christian life the same principle holds true.

Jesus has been moving from one success to another in his ministry. As Mark leads up to this point, we have witnessed some of Jesus' most amazing miracles - the stilling of the storm, the healing of the demon-possessed man, and the restoration of Jairus' little daughter to life. Now, searching for some rest, Jesus journeys back to his own hometown of Nazareth.

At his home synagogue, Jesus begins to teach. And he earns a response, but hardly like that in other places. As in other places, the people are astonished at his teaching, but this time they are astonishingly appalled at his message and manner. "How dare this local boy, Jesus, assume such authority?" they ask. And verse three says, "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."

This is actually the third time that Jesus had tasted a glimpse of failure in his ministry. In Mark 3:21, his own family labeled him crazy and tried to restrain him. In Mark 3:31, his mother and brothers and sisters try again to remove him from his teaching ministry. Here in his home town he meets with out and out rejection, prompting him to utter his famous line, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

Then Jesus turns to commission his disciples for the beginning of their missionary activity. He tells the disciples that it is time for them to begin their ministry, going two by two into the countryside preaching and casting out unclean spirits. He advises them to travel lightly taking nothing but a staff. They are to carry no bread, no bag, and no money in their belts. They are to wear sandals and not even take an extra tunic.

But in verse 11, Jesus prepares them for failure when he says, "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." Jesus makes it clear that they will not be insulated from failure just because they are going in his name. In fact, Jesus knows that failure will be a real possibility, so he provides his disciples with a kind of sacrament of failure - shaking the dust off their feet.

Jesus' inauguration of a "sacrament of failure" does not mean that he is sending the disciples out to fail. Rather, he is showing them how to carry on in the face of failure. Nobody likes to hear they are going to have to face failure in life. But understanding how Jesus provided all Christians with a sacrament of failure can empower all of us to carry on when we fail. Let me explain how this can work in our lives.

1) Failure can lead to better things

The name of John James Audubon is forever associated with the magnificent paintings he made of the birds of North America. No one else has so accurately painted the birds and the natural environment in which they were found. It might not have happened had he not gone bankrupt in business! In 1808, he opened a store in Louisville, Kentucky. It was after he went bankrupt in 1819 that he began traveling and painting birds. We are all richer because of his business failure (Ministers Manual 1991, p. 320).

Shake off the dust and go on.

2) Failure can be creative

When we listen to the exalting music of Handel's Messiah, we usually assume it was surely written by a man at the pinnacle of his success, but that is not the case. In fact, it was written after he had suffered a stroke. It was written while Handel lived in poverty amid bleak surroundings. He had suffered through a particularly deep night of gloom and despair over his failure as a musician, and the next morning he unleashed his creative genius in a musical score that continues to thrill and inspire us generations later (Peter Rhea Jones, Ministers Manual 1991, p. 58).

Shake off the dust and go on.

3) Failure can be failure for Christ

Sometimes failure comes our way when we are doing everything in our power to serve Christ. Some modern theologies promise health, wealth and success if we will only follow Christ. But he promised that his disciples would experience the same kind of rejection that he experienced. Let us never forget that almost everyone of the first twelve suffered martyrdom for Christ. Failure is good when the failure is for Christ's sake.

Shake off the dust and go on.

Failure is not the end of the world. Failure is not a debilitating disease that ruins us for eternity. In fact, we should not be afraid to fail. We should expect failure at times. Then exercise Jesus' ritual of failure - ***shake the dust and go on.***

AMEN