

Proper IX Year B: 7/8 July 2018
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Rev. Gary Cyr

**Each of us has a story to tell and for some, that story entails
incredible transformation.**

Ezekiel 2: 1-5
2 Corinthians 12: 2-10
Mark 6: 1-13
Psalm 123

“Though his own people, those who knew him as he grew up in Nazareth, held to their preferences of remembering Jesus for who he was while ignoring the miracles he’s done and the wisdom he’s shared, Jesus shakes the sand from his sandals and moves forward.”

Biblical scholar Michael L. Lindvall writes regarding today’s gospel that “the human capacity for investing in social norms, for believing in one’s own preferences, is greater than the human capacity for faith.”

Lindvall is simply saying that people, in general, have a tendency to encapsulate one’s preferences whether they be liturgical, musical, political, or ideological to name a few. We even do it with our memories, though by doing so many are guilty of romanticizing the past. Jesus encounters this human inclination towards preferences of memory when he returns to his home town, the place where he grew-up and formed friendships. And I can relate to his experience.

If I were to return to my home town, which I left twelve years ago, I would still be seen as the barber’s son, the one who worked as a barber himself. That isn’t all bad, but it doesn’t fully give voice to the person I’ve become. It fails to recognize the fullness of my journey, the spiritual transformation that occurred, and the academic achievements I’ve gained. I know in my heart, that for some in my home town, their familiarity with who I was would breed contempt for who I’ve become. It would be translated into a joke where I am continually placed in the shadow of who I was.

It happens in families all the time. I will always be the younger sibling; the baby of the family. Each of you, I am sure, have your own story to tell in this regard. Each of us has a story to tell and for some, that story entails incredible transformation. I am not the person I was as a twenty-year-old. None of us are. Life experiences and personal effort to grow has changed that person, though that person still lives inside of me, has helped form and shape the person I've become. It's just frustrating to be remembered for who I was and not seen for who I've become, and I can imagine that Jesus might have felt the same. It's hard not to take such instances personally, but rejection is never easy when it happens.

Jesus has been rejected now three times. Religious authority rejected him when he healed someone on the Sabbath (3.1-6); Gentiles rejected him after he exorcised the Gerasene Demonic (5.1-20); and now, having come full circle, he is rejected by those who ought to have welcomed him without reservation. However, his own town's folk, maybe even relatives, can't seem to accept him for who he's become – the person God made him to be: the prophetic voice and incarnate presence of God. In spite of the rejection, Jesus appears to persevere. Faith, it seems, can do that. At least Jesus' faith does. Jesus, in this instance, is the antitheses to Lindvall's assertion that we tend to invest in our own preferences. Jesus always embodies the preferential option for the poor, the marginalized, the ostracized. Though his home town folk can't or won't see and accept that truth, Jesus, nonetheless, lives it.

Speaking truth in love from the heart and doing so without judgment or condemnation is an essential part of Jesus' message. His words and deeds are an embodiment of this reality. To put it another way, Jesus walks the talk. What he proclaims in words, he performs in deeds. He embodies what he professes. There is no false dichotomy between Jesus' mission and his evangelism. Though his own people, those who knew him as he grew up in Nazareth, held to their preferences of remembering Jesus for who he was while ignoring the miracles he's done and the wisdom he's shared, Jesus shakes the sand from his sandals and moves forward. Does he look back? I don't believe so, and nor does he ask his followers to. Instead, he charges them to keep proclaiming the message and doing good deeds. And that's the truth of today's readings: to proclaim through word and deed the Good News of the gospel is to risk rejection. And that may be why evangelism makes us so uncomfortable.

Evangelism is often mistaken for being evangelical, which are two different ideologies. One is missional, the other more fundamental religiosity. Evangelism is a lived experience rather than an indoctrination. It is proselytizing through an embodied witness and participation in seeking social justice rather than proselytizing that seeks to impose a set of rules and regulations – often of one’s own preferences – upon those who believe and/or act differently than the norm. This is more than simple semantics. How we live out Christ’s message in word and deed is more important than believe in right theology, not that good theology isn’t important. It is. But Jesus’ command to his followers to not take anything with them as they go forth to share the Good News is vital. Their trust is in God’s message of hope and forgiveness, not in humankind’s desire for power and control. Jesus’ idea of evangelism is one based on acceptance rather than judgment, on a witness that fosters healing rather than further discord and division. His message was so unique that even his own kin didn’t or wouldn’t associate with him. Thus, he was rejected by those who ought to have known better.

And what does Jesus suggest when faced with such rejection? Shake the sand from your sandals and continue in faith to proclaim through word and deed the message of compassion, of radical hospitality and welcome. Through that simple gesture, Jesus is saying that there are those whose hearts are hardened, where fear and anger feed mistrust of those who are different from us. In such situations, there is little one can do to change another’s heart, other than acknowledge the rejection and carry on. It is only through God’s grace that another’s heart can change and that is not within our purview. However, if we walk the talk, if we proclaim through our actions what our words profess, God’s grace may be at work and transformation become possible. That’s the kind of evangelism Jesus embodies and what he is asking his disciples to give witness to. An evangelism that is missional: outreach in word and outreach in deed. Jesus took the side of the marginal, the disenfranchised, the disempowered and voiceless, as any good prophet would. He stood against what he saw as a destructive development within his tradition where religion was aligning with social norms and personal preferences instead of having faith that God is at work in the world seeking to reconcile that which humanity has broken. Is it any wonder that Jesus faced rejection? He challenges the status quo after all. And he commissions his disciples to do likewise.

Rejection is a part of life, especially if you embrace the Gospel. It's part and parcel of being a disciple, of following in Jesus' footsteps. I may not be received in my hometown outside of being remembered for who I was and what I did. It doesn't matter. I move forward in faith trusting that God is with me. That is what Jesus is asking each of us to do. Are we ready to speak truth in love, from the heart, without judgment or condemnation? Are we ready to have faith in God and go forth proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, even if it means risking rejection from those closest to our hearts?