

“When Things Go Wrong”
July 7, 2024
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

I’m a little surprised the writer of Mark’s gospel has included this story about Jesus’ failure in Nazareth. It seems a little out of place. Why bother to tell it at all? And in the other gospels, Luke and Matthew who draw heavily on Mark for their material, it’s told a little differently. In Luke, especially, Nazareth is where Jesus delivers his inaugural address. He identifies himself with the prophet Isaiah and lays out his plan to bring good news to the poor. But always he’s rejected by his hometown.

In Mark we’re told he has just returned from “that place,” meaning the north part of Galilee where he raised a little girl from the dead. Before that he had been on the other side of the Sea of Galilee in Gentile country where he healed a man infected with demons. In other words, by the time he gets back home Jesus has built a solid reputation for himself as a healer and teacher that was spreading like wildfire all over the region. So it’s little wonder he was mystified to find so much resistance from people in his own home.

For me, it raises the question of what we should do when things go wrong. Over the last nearly forty years of ministry I’ve seen the church struggle with that question over and over. All sorts of programs have been rolled out on evangelism and stewardship, prayer and Bible study, always trying to find the one thing that will fix us and make us strong and popular again. One view that gets floated pretty often is that we’ve lost membership because we’ve been too open and inclusive, which many consider being “political.” For some when the church advocates for people who are marginalized it’s political, but when we ignore them or openly reject them we’re being righteous. In their minds to fix what’s gone wrong we need to pull back from inclusion and diversity; we need more conformity and restrictions. In other words, when things go wrong we should abandon our values.

I wonder if that occurred to Paul when he met so much resistance in Corinth. We don’t know all the issues that were being argued there, but we can tell from what he says that he’s facing some hostility about his background and his willingness to accept folks into the faith without requiring them to convert to Judaism first. Circumcision is a controversial topic for Paul. There was a faction among Jesus followers who believed that because they are Jewish, which they were, anyone who wanted to join them must first submit to Jewish conversion, which included circumcision. Paul completely rejected that reasoning. He believed that the need to apply the Law to Gentiles was over. By declaring Jesus as their Lord and joining in the life of the community around Jesus’ teachings, they were made part of God’s people through grace. They had to change their lives, probably give up a host of friendships and family relationships, but so long as they committed themselves to the gospel of Christ they were in.

It would have been much easier for Paul to just give in to his opponents and abandon his values. He could have avoided a lot of arguing. But for him, the change he experienced when he committed himself to the way of Jesus opened up a world he never imagined could exist. In his old life Paul was taught there are lines of division between classes of people that can never be

crossed. In fact, God ordained those divisions and certain practices were established, were commanded, to keep them in place. In Christ, Paul sees those divisions evaporate. When he describes the experience of being caught up in the “third heaven,” a story most scholars believe he's telling about himself in the third person, he says he's told things he can't repeat. I think among them is this new truth he's promoting, that all the divisions have fallen away and all are one in Christ.

He can't enforce that among them. He knows that. All he has is the power of persuasion, his own testimony for how this new life has changed him and what the world could look like if they are willing to embrace it. In another letter he spells that out more precisely: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.” That's the vision he's committed to. It's a vision he's willing to defend even if some find it offensive; even if they reject him because of it. In fact, he sees a certain power in standing for something that makes him look weak. Through some weird, twisted logic being open and inclusive and welcoming is considered weakness to many. Paul says, “Fine! Then I'll boast in my weakness!” When things go wrong in Corinth he doesn't abandon his principles, his values, his vision; he reasserts it; he doubles down, even more proudly than before. Relying on the sufficiency of God's grace alone, he tells them, “Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

As Jesus stands amazed at the unbelief of his neighbors and friends, the people who know him longest if not best, he may have been tempted to tailor his message a little to win them over. Instead, though, he doubles down. He sends his disciples out to every little village and settlement they can find to take his free and open healing to all. Relying only on what they carry on their backs, putting their trust entirely in the hospitality of strangers, they go to offer healing and hope to anyone willing to accept it. No strings, no restrictions, no exceptions, anyone open to them is welcome.

It's that kind of thinking that Jesus' former neighbors may have found a little strange. If you have something people want, why not charge them for it? Why just give it away? But what he's giving away isn't healing, that's not the point, that's just a device to point to what's really happening. What Jesus is doing, what he empowers his followers to do, is opening up the Kingdom of God to people who have been imprisoned all their lives. He's setting them free to live with compassion, generosity and justice, everything they need for healing and wholeness. When things go wrong in Nazareth, Jesus doesn't back off those values; he asserts them even more urgently, more lavishly.

That's our challenge in a world where so many things seem to be going wrong. With the threat of autocracy in our politics, in the face of efforts to control what's taught in our schools by banning books and topics, in the drive to control women's lives by limiting access to reproductive healthcare, in the hatred expressed toward people over their gender identity or the shade of their skin or their immigration status, we are living in a time when it feels like all the forces of darkness are aligned against us. Compassion, generosity and justice are seen as weak and naïve. We're being told we must protect our traditions and heritage from those who want to replace us, and the only way to do it is through force. Confronting that is dangerous. It makes us

targets for ridicule or worse. But the way of Jesus, the way of healing, is to hang onto those values no matter what the cost.

We cannot let go our commitment to compassion and inclusion and welcome in the name of Christ, even when things go wrong, even when we're rejected or attacked for the sake of the gospel. The Kingdom of God is where all the divisions that separate us and cause hostility finally fall away. It's where all are welcome no matter where they're from or how they pray or who they love. A world like that, the world Paul envisioned through words whispered to him in heavenly places, the world Jesus came to reveal and entrusted his followers to spread, that world is worth fighting for, no matter how much goes wrong. We must hold on to compassion, generosity and justice and never stop believing in the power of grace, even when we feel weak, to set us free.

Amen