

Mark 6:1-13

Judging from the phone calls, texts, and face-to-face conversations I've had this week, it's been a tough week for a lot of people, politically speaking. As we hurtle toward November in this election year, invective ratchets up, stakes feel higher, and seemingly small details take on outsized importance. I wonder if ever in the history of the United States so many people have obsessed over what the Supreme Court justices are having for lunch.

But don't worry; this sermon is not about to go off the rails on some partisan rant, even if some of you might find that entertaining. Yet I think I can offer all of you some hope, whatever your perspective or party. The hope, weirdly enough, comes in the form of Jesus' failure—yes, I'll say failure—in Nazareth and what happens next.

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The scene is set when the assembly at the synagogue start to imagine that Jesus may be getting too big for his britches. This is a common enough phenomenon, right? You accomplish something good, but the folks back home, in capital letters, Are Not Impressed: "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." Sure, Jesus has just raised the synagogue leader's daughter from the dead, but that doesn't seem like that big a deal. Maybe he's thinking back a few weeks too, to when his family seemed inclined to throw him under the bus for casting out demons.

In a particularly relatable moment, it's implied that Jesus has something of a crisis of confidence about this, or at least that the faith lacking in those who have known him since he was a tiny tot makes a difference in his ability to perform deeds of power. On some level, he fails in his mission, in front of the people he might reasonably hope might be in his corner. He can't get through the wall of unbelief that confronts him.

Jesus is not deterred by this, though. He immediately doubles down by sending his disciples out into the world to extend and amplify his healing work. This is really the moment he has been preparing for since he first called them. He gives them the authority to cast out demons. To heal the sick. To spread life and flourishing everywhere.

But he also puts some constraints on them: "He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics." Doing so ensures that the apostles will remain clear about where this power comes from, by sending them out with only the clothes on their backs, no money, no food, no American Express.

Jesus expects them to be utterly dependent on the grace of God, first of all, and second, on the kindness of strangers. And really, when you think about it, it is often impossible to tell the two apart, the grace of God and the kindness of strangers.

This leaves the disciples vulnerable. It forces them into relationships of radical trust with the households in which they stay. They will not be able to consider themselves the high-and-mighty benefactors bringing the Word of God to the benighted. In short, it invites the apostles into ministry together *with* rather than ministry *to* the people they meet. They will undoubtedly learn as much or more about the Gospel here as they convey to others.

Being so completely dependent also helps to keep them on script, healing others and preaching transformation and forgiveness, rather than substituting their own plans and strategies.

Of course, this dependence upends what most of us have been taught. It can be uncomfortable to pry the controls out of our own two hands. But if the values we've inherited encourage us to think we go through life entirely on our own fuel, that we are self-made individuals, Jesus reminds the apostles and us that we do depend on each other, and that we are ultimately dependent on God alone.

I used to spend a week every summer with confirmation students at camp, where one of the key activities was a climbing wall. Some of the kids were keen to scramble up and others not so certain about hoisting themselves into the air.

Here's the thing: whether you scramble up to the top in record time or summon all your courage just to put a foot on the first block, climbing is an exercise in trust. You have to trust that you will find the next handhold or foothold. You trust, for the most part, that that handhold will hold and not go spinning through the air—and, if it does, that you will nevertheless be held securely in your climbing harness. You trust that those belaying you from the ground have your back.

My late friend Julie's favorite motto was "Leap, and a net appears." Sometimes we don't know what help is available to us until we take a risk and climb a high wall or express our fears to a friend.

I wonder what would happen if we took this seriously as a rule of life. Not just as a program of the church, although I believe it does have major implications for the way we do church. It means we can't just sit in the pews and expect people to find us or do the same things we have always done. But it also suggests that maybe there shouldn't be any separation between what we do on behalf of church and what we do with the rest of our time.

In a piece called “How to Talk about Politics with Young People”

<https://springtideresearch.org/post/data-drop/how-to-talk-about-politics-with-young-people>, Springtide Institute details the results of a study of 13-25 year-olds, representing all

points on the political spectrum. Over and over, what young people had to say about talking to adults, particularly regarding politics, was “Listen!” They reported feeling talked over, dismissed, and misunderstood. And I’m pretty sure many not-so-young people feel the same. We can do better. We can admit that sometimes we’re the ones doing the talking over.

And we can build and strengthen our community relationships by looking for common values across the usual faultlines of politics and religion. This too requires vulnerability and giving up the certainty of being *right* in favor of being *connected*. You can look for wellsprings of joy in your life. You can ask yourself how you are caring for others, and, equally important, *how are they caring for you?* And we can refuse to abandon each other, especially “the least of these,” who often seem expendable for political expediency. That is how we will weather whatever is coming next.

I won’t pretend that any of this is an instant fix for the deep rifts that divide our world. Rather, these practices are meant for a lifetime. We take our place in the long line of Jesus’ followers who have continued to walk a hard road, to carry their cross, because they believe that the power of love really is transformative. That our liberation is wrapped up in the liberation of every part of creation.

Yes, offering hospitality is still an important practice. The fellowship hall is bearing witness to that at this very moment. But Jesus models for us the grace of being both guest and host, of eating in houses with people he’s only just met, and then sitting at the table breaking bread. When we eat his bread and drink his cup, his body and blood become part of our body and blood, filling us so that we too can go out to feed and heal the world. Amen.