

Jesus and his Wisdom
Mark 6.1-13
July 5, 2015
Pentecost +6
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

The second church I served was in the height of renewal when they called me to be their youth minister. Well, technically, they called me to be their youth ministry director as they were in the midst of doing away with traditional church staff titles. There was a worship director, missions director, community director, and so on. I entered just as a two million dollar bequest was being used to fund a two year staff expansion and building renovation. The plan was to double the size of the congregation in two years, from 150 to 300, by attracting 20- and 30-somethings, younger than the overwhelming majority of the congregation, from neighborhoods outside of their own. Everyone seemed confident, smiley, sure of the plan, and I was eager to learn from them.

They took the best from a wildly popular church in Chicago and a wildly popular pastor in California and started using the language and goals and worship style of the Chicago and California congregations. They bought new lighting and sound, they turned an old basketball gym into a coffee house-style worship center. They took out hip ads in the coolest free weekly newspaper. And slowly, new faces started to appear.

Two years passed, and with tremendous effort, many new people arrived. And others left. And active membership wasn't a lot higher than before the two years investment in staff and building. So staff was let go and attention shifted to what worked for membership commitment for a creative, non-traditional church in D.C. while music and preaching took cues from the new, hot pastor of the day in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Slowly, new faces started to appear. And with tremendous effort, many new people arrived. And others left. For several years, maybe a full decade, they were stuck in a cycle of planning, testing a plan, abandoning a plan, planning again, testing a new plan, abandoning that plan, repeat. It took a long time before they talked about what wasn't working, what was unhealthy in their congregation, what was unique and distinct to them as people, how they might best serve and connect with their neighbors. It took a long time before they ditched the canned worship music and borrowed sermons. It took even longer for them to talk about what loving God and loving neighbors looked like for that *particular* group of people in that *particular* neighborhood. And then they chose to give their facility away to another church who wanted to live out the rest of the story.

Those are the quick highlights and not a comprehensive case study. A complex stories across a decade can't be adequately told in mere minutes. The leaders and decision makers were well-intentioned, devout people of faith, many of whom I still know and love. I know they worked hard and meant every planning meeting and new strategy for good. I look back over the past twelve years of their story and see smart, capable

professionals who took the best business practices they knew from their areas of expertise and applied them to the church. What works for others? Copy, borrow, improve. It seems like a sound, reasonable way to approach growth and success. If it works for business, it should work for the church. Right???

Of course, we see the tempting parallels between their story and ours. St. Charles is not in danger of ditching the organ for a band or sanctuary for the fellowship hall, but like almost every other congregation in this country, we are aware that this church is not what it once was and is not yet what it will be. We are living in the tension of the now and seeking to do so purposefully, with prayer and intention, with creativity and affection. **It is tempting to ask, “what’s working for those people out there and over there” and think that living into our fullest, best self is as simple as living someone else’s story.**

We apply this thinking in our personal lives, too. What works for my neighbor? What life tips are magazines suggesting? What works for favorite celebrities? What works for the yoga instructor I adore? We pick goals for ourselves: amass wealth, lose 30 pounds, buy a house in the Garden District. We draw a picture of the real life that we want and set out to get it.

Then we sit with Mark in his continued story about Jesus. And Jesus isn’t too hung up on goal setting and particular outcomes. Jesus is looking at the standard practices of traveling preacher/teacher/healers around him, and he’s creating a Way that is markedly different than their way.

Jesus is wildly popular and widely followed. He has gotten to the point that he attempts to escape crowds by taking a boat across the sea of Galilee, people seek him out to be healed and sometimes even grab healing from him. Today, he has gone to his hometown and does what he always does: he teaches, he heals. People recognize that he has power and that he is saying things that matter. But they know him. They grew up with him. They know his mama. They feel certain he isn’t any better than the rest of them. Who does he think he is?

He looks at them with amazement. I picture it as almost a curiosity. He hears what they’re saying and realizes his words and actions can’t be received there except by a few. “Then he went about the villages teaching.”

He doesn’t argue. He doesn’t try a different technique. He doesn’t perform some pyrotechnic miracle that knocks their socks off. He realizes *these* people are no longer *his* people, and he keeps going until he finds the ones who are.

He isn’t anxious about this. He isn’t panicked. He doesn’t puff up and prove. He looks at them with amazement, and then moves on.

He calls his students together and divides them into six pairs. He tells them it’s their turn to go out and teach and cure and bless just like he has been going, but he gives them some limitations—don’t travel like other teachers do; rely only on what you need for each day

and accept the hospitality of those who welcome you. If it's clear that you're not heard, not welcome, and not being invited in, let it go.

Don't allow discouragement to become a way of life, a way of thinking, a way of seeing the world. "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." Teach, bless, anoint, free, and walk away when you aren't heard, aren't effective, aren't welcomed. Don't let that lack of welcome define you. Dust it off and keep going.

Jesus gave them permission to fail. It's okay to not be good at all things and welcome in all places. It's okay to move on to the next town. And when that happens, it says more about the people who can't hear you and won't welcome you than it does about you, so shake that dust off and leave it where it falls.

This is not to say that what Jesus and the disciples are saying and doing doesn't really matter. Quite the opposite, actually. It is to say that their focus is clear because living in a particular way as a particular people matters. "[W]hat if what's at stake here," writes David Lose, "isn't a matter of God's ultimate purposes or our eternal destinies. After all, it's not like Jesus couldn't do *anything* [in his hometown.] I'm sure the people he healed were glad of his miraculous ministrations. What if, rather, Mark is simply inviting us to contemplate the possibility that we have actually have something *to do*, that we have an important role to play in the manifestation of the kingdom. To say it another way: this isn't about salvation, it's about the role each one of us is invited to play in sensing, experiencing, and making known God's will and work in the world."¹

The task of our lives is to sense, experience, and make known God's work in this world. And that task will be unique for each person in this room just as it is distinct for each congregation living out Christ's Way together. The invitation is to be clear of our role on the journey and the challenge is to not let the dust pile up on our feet.

There are relationships and physical places and metaphorical spaces where we have NOT shaken the dust off of our feet. We have held onto it like curators at a museum. We have put dusty shoes up on display shelves with a paragraph or two or three describing the way we were wronged and how we were actually right and how everything changed from that day forward and what life could have been like if we'd gotten our way. And what life could still be like if we can just go back to *that* moment with *that* person and fix it. And sometimes we hold out hope that if we preserve that dust long enough then the person who put it there will come back to clean it off, and we'll be vindicated because we really were right all along.

The Wisdom of Jesus' way says to shake that dust off. Acknowledge with amazement the places where we are unwelcome and unheard. Then, as in a blessing or a prayer over that blocked place, ritualize whatever isn't letting you move forward. If there's a geographical place that embodies what you carry, go there and literally shake off the dust from whatever you're wearing on your feet. Walk the labyrinth in Audubon Park and leave your dust at the

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1620>

center of the path before turning to walk away with open, empty hands. Write a letter that you burn in a fireplace. Bravely call someone you have avoided for years. Let it go *now* because it will continue to eat you up, if you let it, and it will most certainly distract you and prevent you from experiencing the abundant life to which God is calling you today. There's another village waiting for you, another day, another task, another opportunity for you to sense and experience and make known God's work in the world. Don't miss it because you're still thinking about what if, what was, what could have been.

Karoline Lewis offers an invitation: Like the disciples sent out by Jesus, "maybe this week you admit your own need for hospitality. Maybe this week you walk through the doors opened to you and let go of your excuses about discomfort and time and worthiness. Maybe this week you truly give up control and give in to what others want to do for you.

This won't be easy. And it will probably be uncomfortable...But it's worth it. Because to experience the kind of [life] that Jesus has in mind is to experience the love of our God -- so deep, so wide, so huge; the love of our God which shows mercy no matter what; the love of our God which became flesh so that the doors of the divine heart might be flung open to all."²

You and I, we have life to do. We have been called to live into the way of Jesus. At St. Charles, this is our busiest month of the entire calendar year. We have vacation bible school to lead, and book studies to attend, and summer concert nights to host. We have friends coming in from across the US and Canada to celebrate and study hymnody. We have salads and ice cream to make, we have business to discuss. We have a kindness corner to unveil at Broadway. And that's just July. We are being swept up into the kingdom of God and living out God's grace and peace right here at 7100 St. Charles Avenue. If you want to be part of *this* moment on *this* day, I invite you to make the active choice to join us in the now. There is no room for holding onto old dust that long ago should have left your feet. Leave that behind in yesterday. Welcome and bless today.

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=3648>