

In today's reading, Jesus is dissed by his hometown neighbors and doesn't perform his usual miracles among them. Then he sends out his disciples to replicate what he's been doing. This is something of a pattern in Mark: a failure and then a new return to the mission. In fact, it's sort of Mark's way of preparing us for the Passion. In Mark's Passion narrative, Jesus is utterly defeated, speechless, doomed and destroyed . . . and then the narrative dumps the whole enterprise into the laps of us, the listeners or readers, implying that there is a next move to be made, and it's ours.

There's some special nastiness in Jesus' rejection by his hometown. They call him "the son of Mary," implying that either he has no legitimate father or that, as eldest son, he shouldn't have left his mother, he should have taken responsibility for supporting her—or maybe they're implying both. It's not nice. But even though Mark says Jesus could do no deeds of power there, he healed a few sick people which is not nothing, so the villagers' negativity was not enough to defeat Jesus entirely.

Still, he went away from there, and his next move was to replicate himself times twelve. He told the disciples to go out and do what he did, and in anticipation of the inevitable rejections, he told them to just shake the dust off their feet and move on when they were not received. So getting rejected was baked into the mission. Significantly, the disciples are *not* to go to the synagogues, but to households. In his hometown Jesus had preached at the synagogue, and it hadn't gone well. Perhaps part of the new strategy is to bypass the places where there's already a power structure and protocols about what's permissible, and to work in nontraditional venues. The Jesus Movement is like my bonsai tree: when you cut off a branch, two grow in its place. ("Trees in nature are not mortally wounded each time a squirrel or porcupine bites a branch or wind removes a limb. There would be no forests if trees were so easily damaged nor

would the entire bonsai hobby be feasible if plants responded to common injuries by dying.”) When Jesus gets a “no,” he goes around it and finds a “yes.”

So off go the disciples, and Mark says that they specifically did the following: proclaimed that all should repent; cast out many demons; anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. Jesus did not tell them to preach about him, and apparently they didn’t. Their message was repentance: turning around, changing from one orientation to another orientation. One of my favorite commentators, Mark Davisⁱⁱ, ties this repentance message to the so-called messianic secret in Mark, which is the way that gospel always has Jesus shushing people and demons up so that they won’t tell who cured them or exorcised them. Mark’s theory is that this isn’t so much a secret as a **re-direction**. He says,

By attempting over and over to make Jesus ‘the Messiah,’ people were missing the point of his message, which was that the Reign of God was present and that they all were invited to *participate* in it. **As long as they had the Messiah to embody the reign, they were missing the participation part.** To ‘follow’ is not to point to, observe, marvel, coronate, or even profess. It is more about joining along, taking up the message, indeed taking up the cross that is central to the message, and “believing” by living in the present reign of God. It is healing the sick, delivering those who are oppressed, etc. . . . Mark saw Jesus trying to re-direct his message away from himself and toward following-as-participating.

So of course Jesus doesn’t send his disciples out to preach about him. He sends them out to enact the reign of God, just the way he does. Jesus’ message is not “believe in me” or “I’m the only one who can save you;” his message is “repent and believe the good news—the kingdom of God is at hand.” The “kingdom of God” is an expression for the rule or fundamental power of love.

Mark Davis goes on to suggest that what you turn away *from* is Empire—the rule or the power that is oriented around coercive force and zero-sum thinking. Davis thinks Empire is the obvious answer to “what do you turn away from” just because of the social and historical

location of Jesus and of Mark, which is a pretty good reason, but the corrosive effects of an orientation toward Empire are not restricted to the first century CE. In Tolstoy's novel "Resurrection," the protagonist, Nekhludoff, casually exploits a vulnerable young woman and then realizes later with horror how his careless objectification of her has snowballed into catastrophe. He begins to see that there is a whole orientation of exemption from human responsibility that makes dehumanization both possible and predictable at all levels. Witnessing heatstroke among prisoners at forced labor, Nekhludoff reflects:

"All this comes . . . from the fact that all these people, governors, inspectors, police officers, and men, consider that there are circumstances in which human relations are not necessary between human beings. All these men, . . . if they were not governor, inspector, officer, would have considered twenty times before sending people in such heat in such a mass—would have stopped twenty times on the way, and, seeing that a man was growing weak, gasping for breath, would have led him into the shade, would have given him water and let him rest, and if an accident had still occurred they would have expressed pity. But they not only did not do it, but hindered others from doing it, because they considered not men and their duty towards them but only the office they themselves filled, and held what that office demanded of them **to be above human relations**. "That's what it is," Nekhlyudov went on in his thoughts. "If one acknowledges but for a single hour that anything can be more important than love for one's fellowmen, even in some one exceptional case, any crime can be committed without a feeling of guilt." ⁱⁱⁱ

Nekhlyudov's example of the officers disregarding the suffering of their prisoners is eerily similar to what Derek Chauvin did to George Floyd a little over a year ago. He knelt on his neck and cut off his breathing while casually ignoring Floyd's appeals for relief. And precisely because this was not an isolated incident, but part of a pattern of dehumanization and abuse of people of color by white people in positions of authority, there was an outcry across the country and a renewed question, "Is this really who we are?"

There's no question that our country from its founding benefited crucially from genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans. Our Founding Fathers, for all their lofty rhetoric and commitment to a radically new form of government, also took for granted that the

United States would not treat all persons with equal respect or opportunity. We know that, and it always makes the celebration of Independence Day bittersweet, realizing how much wickedness has been ignored or justified in the name of patriotism from the very beginning. Critical race theory has a lot to say about our current reality. In one way yes, this is who we are.

But this is also not who we are. When people saw Derek Chauvin acting in the way that Tolstoy described—as if his office were more important than human relations—Americans cried out against that. With all the structural racism we’ve absorbed, with all our blind spots and implicit bias, we still understood that this was deeply wrong. We said No because we do believe in the principles of the Declaration of Independence, and more important, many of us who are Christians said No because we understand in our bones that this kind of brutality is in opposition to the kingdom of God. People in this country can practice whatever religion is meaningful to them, and they are as fully American as you and I are, but Christians as followers of Jesus are called to participate in the reign of God and turn away from the ways of Empire, and shame on us if we claim that “law and order” are more important than sibling love.

It is painful to love your country, to love its ideals, and to see it behaving in a brutal and corrupt way while proclaiming exceptional status as a way to avoid addressing its faults. It’s also painful to be a Christian and to feel relatively powerless to make meaningful change or to alleviate the suffering of those who get the brunt of the brutality. So the Fourth of July is a difficult holiday. But when Jesus was rejected by his own neighbors, he recalibrated and kept going in a new way, by sending out his disciples to do more of the same even while prepared to be rejected too. And the reason he did that was that the brutality and corruption of Empire never cancel out the humanity and compassion in human hearts, and so it’s always worth it to proclaim repentance and good news. I do still hold hope that America can redeem itself and live up to its

own ideals, but regardless, the good news that Jesus proclaimed is real. We *can* live by the power of love, and it *will* be seen and it *will* transform those whom it touches.

O God,
give your transforming love to the citizens of this land.
Help us to exercise our citizenship with wisdom and compassion,
so that the poor and powerless may be treated fairly and with justice.
Open our ears to the cries for help from those caught
in cycles of poverty, abuse or violence.
Give us wisdom to examine ourselves honestly
and courage to do the right thing, even when it may not be popular.
May the people flourish;
may there be lasting peace and plenty for all. Amen.

ⁱ <https://bonsaitrees.com/fairie.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/07/mission-grounded-in-rejection.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1938/1938-h/1938-h.htm> Chapter XL, « The Fundamental Law of Human Life”