Shake the Dust

Cooke’s-Portsmouth

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Matthew 9:35-10:23

This is a lot of scripture for us to muse this morning. Too much, really, for the time allotted for a reflection. This could easily be a series of sermons spread out over several weeks. It begins with a reference to the compassion of Jesus, who was moved to respond to the plethora of needs that he was daily faced with: harassed and helpless people living under the oppression of Rome and the biases of patriarchy and elitism. They were desperate for leadership in no less a way than sheep need a shepherd to direct, feed and comfort. In response to the disparate needs he authorizes his disciples to cure, preach and cleanse without expectation of payment.

He instructs them to not take rejection too personally; to shake the dust of unwelcoming homes and communities from their sandals and carry on. It culminates with warnings about ongoing rejection, persecution and hatred. It is a challenging piece of truth to grapple with, especially in the wake of the protests and riots that we have witnessed in Europe and America over the death of George Floyd because of police brutality. People of colour as well as whites grow weary of the passage of time and the issues of racism continuing to discriminate, wound and kill. It is no small thing to shake the dust off of one’s feet when a person of colour is abused by white people entrusted with the responsibility to serve and protect. And when peaceful protest escalates into rioting, violence and more unnecessary deaths it is hard indeed not to feel sad and helpless.

Alexander Wimberly has written those early followers of Jesus, as firsthand witnesses of what was possible with Jesus, could very well have gone off with confidence, determination and nerves of steel. We may feel more like sheep without a shepherd. Modern Christians are not comfortable discussing our faith too deeply with someone sitting beside in the pew, let alone strangers in neighbouring towns. The disciples may have been willing to dust off their feet and seek out more warm and welcoming community but in our multicultural and pluralistic world we are reticent about approaching another for fear of being viewed as pushy. And rejection-regardless of the form that it takes-is never easy to recover from.

The church is a voluntary organization and members are free to leave a community and settle somewhere else. But this is never easy for any minister to live with. Our heads will tell us that this is a person’s choice; evidence of the free will that we have been endowed with by God; but we wonder what we could have done differently or better. The successes that we have known in a career can recede to the furthest reaches of our memories and the coulda, woulda, shoulda consume our waking and dreaming. If only a different action had been taken; or delayed for a time; or not been taken at all. We may want to shake the dust off and move on; hoping in time to forget the misstep and the lingering sense of shame and embarrassment. But sometimes, shaking the dust means to allow for the creative power of God to work to transform.

A pastor recalls this story from his early days post ordination when he was most excited to celebrate Christmas Eve with his parishioners on his first pastoral charge. A few months earlier he had been appointed to a church whose Sunday morning congregation was about 15. Together they had started making plans for Christmas. A leaflet with a Christmas message and all the dates and times of pending services throughout the Advent season was compiled and delivered to 3000 households in the wider community.

The young pastor had insisted that there should be a midnight communion on Christmas Eve. That was always the highlight of his Christmas’ growing up. No one in the congregation remembered ever going to church at midnight, but he still thought it was a great idea. He set the time for 11:30 p.m., Dec. 24. He arrived at the church at 11:00 pm all excited and prepared but no one was there.

11:15 … still no one there.

11:25 … still just him, the bread and the wine.

11:30 … he tried so hard, so hard, to stop a tear beginning to roll down my eyelashes.

As he sat all alone in that church late that Christmas Eve, his face in his hands and the first tear beginning to work its way down his fingers to his wrist, he heard a rustling noise. He looked at his watch .It was 11:32. The door opened. Into the church walked a man and a woman, maybe late 40s that he had never seen them before.

“Is it just us?” they asked.

“I’m afraid it is,” he replied, totally humiliated.

“Oh, good,” the woman said. “We waited to see if anyone else would come, and when we thought we’d be the only ones, we walked in.”

“How do you mean?” he asked, gesturing for them to sit down

“Well,” she said, “I guess you should know that Dave and I used to be married to other people until recently. There’s a lot of folk unhappy about us being together. We moved out here because we didn’t feel we could go to any of the downtown churches. In fact, we haven’t been to church at all for over a year. We were frightened to come tonight, but when we saw we’d be the only ones, we got the courage to walk through the door. Our lives are a mixture of love and shame. We feel we’re in the dust. We want to begin again.”

The pastor stared at them in silence for a long time. Any thought of failure and rejection that he had been experiencing over the lack of attendance began to ebb. All he could see before him was dust, dust and ashes, two people coming before God in dust and ashes. God was making a new creation before his very eyes, and making it from the dust of the earth, just like the first time.

He said to them, “Remember you are dust. This is where God’s work of creation and redemption begins. Right here. Right now.”

Two minutes earlier he had been lamenting the seeming indifference of his congregants and his disappointment that they seemed not to share his passion for midnight communion on Christmas Eve. And while he fought back the tears and was feeling sorry for himself there was God, making glory from the dust of the earth. Reminding two lost souls that they were not alone and to take the risk to cross the threshold.

I would love to know what happened next in the lives of that couple. Did they continue to only attend church when no one else showed up? Would they find forgiveness in the new and tiny community and be accepted and welcomed regardless of their past? Alas the story ends here and we are left with both an understanding of transformation and curiosity. But we can relate to the story about unrealistic expectations and the ensuing disappointment when expectations are not met and the pain experienced by ostracism and judgement so ingrained in the couple.

There are experiences that we may endure that seem unredemptive: the sting of failure and the pain of rejection ripple to the surface when we recall the experience. This is what I first think of when I hear the phrase about shaking the dust off. But in this illustration our eyes are opened to the possibility that we may need to shake the dust off to allow for God’s creative and transformative power to work. Shaking the dust may involve a very intentional process.

We may need to ask forgiveness more than once. Our offers to make things right may go unresponded to. We are imperfect beings and no one can please all of the people all of the time. There are oversites and missteps; unintentional commissions and omissions. And sometimes we feel like lambs among the wolves. The disciples were given fair warning. You will be hated by some and made to be accountable to those in authority. You will be persecuted, misunderstood and unforgiven but the one who endures will be saved. Be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

When Jesus told the Twelve to be as wise as serpents and harmless as doves, He laid down a general principle about the technique of kingdom work. As we take the gospel to a hostile world, we must be wise (avoiding the snares set for us), and we must be innocent (serving the Lord blamelessly). Jesus was not suggesting that we stoop to deception but that we should model some of the serpent’s famous shrewdness in a positive way. Wisdom does not equal dishonesty, and innocence does not equal gullibility.

Successful Christian living requires that we strike the optimal balance between the dove and the serpent. We should strive to be gentle without being pushovers, and we must be sacrificial without being taken advantage of. We are aware of the unscrupulous tactics used by the enemy, but we take the high road.

I have had my share of disappointments throughout my ministry. Heretofore I have seen the counsel to shake the dust from my feet as counsel to accept defeat, rejection and lack of support. To learn from it and move on. But thanks be to the minister who shared his memory of a Christmas Eve midnight in the once upon a time when he was sorely disappointed but was given a great gift on the night when we celebrate receiving the greatest gift.

He learned that God can transform the dust of negativity, failure and seeming rejection and transform it. We may not have the desired legacy that we may want as we shake the dust and move on. But I take heart in the truth that maybe as we shake the dust of rejection, disappointment and failure that God transforms us so that we might be increasingly wise and more innocent. May it be so for us. Amen.