

“Loud as Dust”

Psalm 22:1-13; Mark 6:1-13 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – August 29, 2021

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might heed your example of love and mercy even in the face of adversity. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Can you imagine not liking Jesus? One of the ways we talk about the Christian faith is to encourage having a “personal relationship” with Jesus. He’s supposed to be a friend, an older brother, a confidant, someone you can trust and rely on, who will always love you no matter what. How could you not love that? And yet, here we are, confronted by this story in which Jesus is rejected, questioned, cut down to size. And it was the home-town crowd, the people who might have been expected to be most proud of him, the most supportive and welcoming. But no. It was all “Who does he think he is?” and “Somebody’s gotten a little too big for his britches!”

And while we might like to think that Jesus would be above taking such rejection to heart, it clearly had an impact. “He could do no deed of power there,” Mark writes, “except that he laid hands on a few sick people and cured them.” This story illustrates one of Jesus’ most human moments. Rejection is bad enough, but rejection from the people you’re closest to? It hurts. It’s quite a gift to be surrounded by people who know you well, who’ve seen you grow up and experienced life from the same place you did. But how many of us have had this other experience, where those same people try to define you and label you, telling you who you are because of

their assumptions about where you came from, and thus also telling you who you can't be? They want their presumptions and their experiences to limit you the same way they limit them. Anything that reaches beyond their understanding of what life is about is mocked, minimized, and rejected. It's amazing how devastating it can be to have someone who knows you well tell you you can't do something. Even Jesus was affected by it, to some degree.

There seems no question that this story of Jesus in his hometown influences the story that comes next. We can safely say that, in most instances, rejection by people you know is more painful than rejection by strangers. But rejection from anyone is hard. So when Jesus was preparing the disciples to fan out to surrounding villages and share the good news, he brought up the fact that there might be places where people wouldn't be open to their message. And what did he tell them to do? "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."

Over the centuries, we have latched onto this image with great enthusiasm. When a situation has become untenable, when a former friend or circumstances at work or a particular family dynamic have gotten too ugly, too unforgiving, too life-draining, our friends will tell us to "shake off the dust" and move on. Don't let them define you. Don't let them affect you. Tell them where to shove it and carry your bad self on out of there with pride! Shaking off the dust is sometimes shorthand for flouncing out of the room in a dramatic huff.

But is that what Jesus intended? In these difficult days in which we live, it seems worthwhile to pause a moment and consider the nuances of this symbolic reaction Jesus suggested. Relationships are strained these days, in our families and within our circles of friends, but also between strangers at the grocery store or the bank. A colleague of mine just this week was asking for advice on how to let her cousin know she and her husband wouldn't be attending her wedding because they weren't comfortable with the lack of covid precautions being planned. Our County Supervisors spent hours listening to people yell at them and call them Nazis because of the health precautions they've recommended over the months of the pandemic. Families are divided and distanced by whether or not to get a shot. Teachers have had masks snatched off their faces by angry parents, while children are afraid to go to school because they're worried they'll get sick. How do we navigate such troubled waters as followers of Jesus? If we're feeling rejected by loved ones or scorned by strangers, what would it look like to "shake off the dust"?

There are, unsurprisingly, a number of angles from which to explore this question. First of all, there is the issue of truth-telling. Jesus tells the disciples to shake off that dust "as a testimony against them." What truth does dust tell? The testimony here is about a failure to live up to one of the highest values in this first-century culture, namely hospitality. When strangers arrive in your village, you are supposed to welcome them and take them in. As you have heard before, one of the central rituals of this hospitality is foot washing. It is both practical and symbolic.

Your guests have been walking on a dusty road, and you want them to feel refreshed. So a basin of water is offered for the guests to wash off their feet, or even better, someone from within the household would wash the guests' feet themselves.

So what truth does shaking the dust off your feet communicate? It is a testimony to the fact that there is still dust on your feet, because no one offered you the opportunity to wash it off. It is a testimony that the village or the household in question has failed at the most basic requirements of hospitality. It is holding up a mirror to those who have rejected you that shows them what their hardheartedness looks like. These are the consequences of your actions, the dust says. Do not look away. Do not pretend your choices have no impact on others.

What does this kind of truth-telling look like in our present situation? In these days when we no longer agree on who the authoritative sources of information are, tangible examples like dusty feet might be the best testimonies we can offer. The numbers of unvaccinated folks on respirators in the ICU ought to be a testimony that breaks through to any hardened heart. The numbers of children being sent home from school to quarantine ought to cut through rhetoric and vitriol. Telling the truth in an age of misinformation is a radical act. And sadly, it is becoming the last exchange some folks are having with loved ones before cutting off communication completely. When you've argued and shared statistics and pleaded for the common good, and people still won't budge from their positions of denial and delusion, what more can you do but put the truth out there and move on?

It's disheartening to cut off relationships in this way. It's hard, because we don't want to give up on those we love. Even when we're arguing with strangers – or more likely, friends of friends – on social media, there is some underlying desire to help people understand that motivates the fruitless conversation. But perhaps Jesus wants us to “shake off the dust”.

If we're going to do that, we need to notice a few more things about this metaphor. We like to think that the inhospitable people of these recalcitrant villages were all gathered around when the disciples were leaving town, dramatically shaking the dust off their feet before they took off. But there isn't actually indication that that was the case. When Jesus calls that dust shaking a testimony, he's not promising that the truth is being proclaimed to those who don't believe it. It's important to remember that sometimes the testimony is for us, not those who are rejecting us. No matter how we've been treated, we need to proclaim our truth, so that we can re-ground ourselves in who and whose we are.

Shaking off dust isn't loud. It isn't violent. It doesn't take anything away from our opponent; indeed, it's actually returning to them what was theirs. Its power is found in its willingness to relent, rather than its insistence on control. It's a recognition of the other's decision to stay stuck where they are, unwilling to listen to truth or good news. We cannot force people to be compassionate. But we can refuse to let them push us away from compassion. They may reject us, and that may hurt. We may not be able to effect any further good in their lives. But that doesn't take

away our capacity to do good in other places, for other people. Whether it's family members, friends, friends of friends, or total strangers, the truth of Jesus' compassion is something worth testifying to, with our words and our deeds, wherever we may go. Hallelujah and Amen.