

## “Shake It Off”

“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.”

My cousin Mark is an incredibly gifted home builder whose construction company had built some magnificent homes in New Jersey and New Hampshire. As might be expected, the homes Mark has built for himself and his family are equally spectacular, testimonies to his skill and attention to detail that has made him a very popular and in-demand contractor. While all his homes are custom-built to the specifications of the homeowners, there is one element that you will find in every home Mark builds: a “mud room.” When we visited Mark and his wife, Janet, at their New Hampshire home, I was not sure what he meant by this phrase; I even wondered if it was a place to store mud! But it turns out that mud rooms are very common in New Hampshire and other northern climates, an entrance to one’s home in which one can take off muddy boots and shoes as well as hang winter coats and scarves. A mud room prevents elements from all seasons from being brought into the house and dirtying carpets and floors.

While our houses may not have a dedicated mud room, there are many ways in which we try to prevent dirt, mud, and other elements from coming into our homes. When I first arrived in Canada, I was impressed by the custom of taking off one’s shoes when entering a home (something that is not common in the USA). In our home, we have a bench in our entrance foyer that gives us a seat to put on and take off boots in the bad weather, and our garage gives us another entrance in which muddy shoes and other dirty items can be taken off before entering the house. In my childhood in New Jersey, trips to the beach meant coming into the side entrance of our house rather than the front door, lest some of the sand that we brought back did not get into the house. Even before we opened the door, we were careful to shake off the sand that was on our shoes, in our clothes, and other parts of the body to which beach sand always seemed to stick, and unintended souvenir of our trip to the Jersey Shore.

The custom of removing footwear and shaking dust and dirt off one’s person before entering a home is one that has been practiced by civilizations throughout the world for centuries. In biblical times, it was common to offer guests a basin of water in which they could wash their feet (which were often clad only in sandals) before

entering the home of their host; in wealthier homes, this task was performed by servants. Jesus refers to this custom in his response to the Pharisee who criticizes the action of the woman who washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair: *“Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.”* (Luke 7:44). In John’s account of the Last Supper, Jesus shocks the disciples by taking on the role of a household slave in washing their feet, which he later uses as a moment of teaching on how they are to serve others as his apostles:

- “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you should also do what I have done to you.” – John 13:12-15.

The issue of dust and dirt that clings to one’s feet is again at the heart of today’s Gospel lesson from Mark, in which Jesus leaves the place where he has performed three miracles that overcame the *“life-destroying powers of demonic possession, chronic illness, and death”* (Pheme Perkins) and returns to his hometown of Nazareth with his disciples. The reader might expect that Jesus would have been greeted as a hometown hero, a son of Nazareth whose fame was spreading in every place he ministered; but instead, Jesus is greeted with hostility and rejection. At first, the visit begins on a positive note; when Jesus enters the synagogue on the sabbath and begins to teach, *“many who heard him were astounded”* (Mark 6:2). Their amazement at his teaching lead them to ask each other *“where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power were being done by his hands!”* Their response is similar to that of the crowds that heard Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”* (Matthew 7:28-29).

But the initial astonishment of the Nazarenes soon takes a dark turn: when Jesus’ hometown audience reflects on who he is, their initial reaction turns to rejection: *“Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mark and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him.”* (6:3). They are offended because Jesus has dared to step out of the status and role in society that he had in his village. As a carpenter (*tekton*), Jesus and his family were not impoverished tenant farmers or day labourers, but his status as a local craftsperson would have been lower than that of a member of the educated class. Villagers commonly resented those who attempted to elevate their position above that to which they were entitled at birth; *“Jesus’ former neighbours do not deny that*

*he does and says amazing things. Either their initial wonder morphs into skepticism, or, more likely, the astonishment is an expression of the umbrage they feel toward him; ‘who does this guy think he is?’” (Matt Skinner).*

The negative response of the hometown crowd to Jesus’ teaching is a reminder of an earlier attempt by Jesus’ family to stop his wandering and public preaching:

- “Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” – 3:20-21.

Even though Jesus has astonished his hometown crowd by his authoritative teaching and deeds of power, “*the townspeople are scandalized by the human origins of Jesus, whom they know as a carpenter.*” (Perkins).

Jesus responds to the rejection he is experiencing in his hometown by citing a proverbial phrase that declares that “*prophets are not without honour; except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.*” (6:4). The rejection of a prophet by his own people recalls the words of the Lord to Ezekiel, encouraging the prophet to remain steadfast in his proclamation even in the face of rejection and opposition by those who are the intended recipients of the word of the Lord:

- “And you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear them or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house.” – Ezekiel 2:6-7.

The unbelief of Jesus’ own people has a restrictive, dampening effect on his work in their midst. Since the miracles in the previous chapter emphasize the importance of faith in those who approach Jesus for healing, the result of the unbelief of the Nazarenes was that “*he could do no deed of power there*” (6:5a); but even in the face of opposition, Jesus is still able to overcome this impediment to his work when “*he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.*” (6:5b). His miracles in Nazareth are a witness that “*opposition to the reign of God takes a toll and has lasting consequences, but it never has the last word*” (Skinner). Rather than stay to argue with his own people or to try to convince them by further mighty works, Jesus moves on, “*amazed at their unbelief*” (6:6a).

- “Their rejection neither discourages him nor puts a stop to his work. He continues his ministry of teaching, continuing to offer the gospel of God to whoever has ears to hear.” – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

After shaking off the opposition that he has faced from his hometown crowds, Jesus “*went among the villages teaching.*” (6:6b). Instead of allowing the hometown rejection to inhibit his ability to continue his ministry, Jesus instead takes steps to expand his ministry’s reach when “*he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits.*” (6:7). Jesus had previously chosen the Twelve to participate in his ministry: “*And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons*” (3:14-15). Now he sends them out with the authority to expel demons as well as to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God. Jesus does not await full understanding or admirable discipleship on the part of the Twelve before associating them with himself and his mission. Flawed as they are, he sends them out to “*participate directly in Jesus’ own activity of bringing about the rule of God*” (Perkins). They are to be extensions of Jesus’ own activity; “*His twelve disciples, who were originally described as deputized preachers and exorcists, receive marching orders.*” (Skinner).

Sending out missionaries in pairs is a characteristic of early Christian missionary activity. Jesus initially called pairs of brothers to be his disciples, issuing the invitation to Simon and his brother Andrew as well as James and John, the sons of Zebedee, to “*follow me and I will make you fish for people*” (1:17). Acts refers to the ministry of several missionary pairs who are sent out two by two to continue to apostolic ministry that began on the day of Pentecost:

- “While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon’s Portico, utterly astonished.” – Acts 3:11
- “The Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him back to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they associated with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians.’” – Acts 11:25-26.
- “The next day [Peter] got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him.” – Acts 10:23.

The disciples are also sent out in pairs to assure the validity of their witness and to exemplify their participation in the community of faith. Before they set off on their missionary activities, Jesus issues a set of instructions that will govern their conduct as his emissaries. They are to travel light and to accept whatever hospitality is

offered to them when they enter a village. They are to avoid appearances of seeking personal gain so that they are not engaged in preaching and healing to make money for themselves. When they accept the hospitality of someone who offers them lodging, they are to “*stay there until you leave the place*” (6:10), so that “*they make it clear that they aren’t trying to game their way up toward greater creature comforts*” (Skinner).

- “These simple instructions, which reflect the practice of early Christian missionaries, call those engaged in ministry back to the fundamental basis of all preaching, healing, and teaching: the ministry and person of Jesus. Whatever material resources ministers possess should serve the needs of those to whom they bring the gospel.” – Perkins.
- With the rejection from his hometown people still fresh on his mind, Jesus instructs his disciples on how they are to deal with similar rejection. As Jesus did not allow this negative experience to discourage him or deter him from his ministry, but instead moved on to other villages, so his emissaries on this mission are not to tarry, seeking to persuade those who refuse the message. Instead, he teaches them that “*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*” (6:11). The act of shaking dust off one’s feet was an ancient gesture of cursing a place:
- “I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, ‘So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.’ And all the assembly said, ‘Amen,’ and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.” – Nehemiah 5:13.
- “When they opposed and reviled [Paul], in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, ‘Your blood be on you own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’” – Acts 18:6.

The act of shaking the dust off one’s feet stands as a testimony before God that the town has refused to hear God’s Word. Rather than allowing this to become a stumbling block to their ministry, the disciples are to follow Jesus’ example in moving on from rejection to other places that will be receptive to God’s Word. In all aspects of their ministry, they are to follow the example of Jesus as is set forth in the letter to the Hebrews:

- “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that is set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” – Hebrews 12:1-2.

Mark reports that the disciples obey Jesus’ commands and can accomplish much of the mission that he has entrusted to them: *“So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”* (6:12-13). Their proclamation and their anointing the sick with oil reflect the practice of the early church, where those who were sick would *“call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointed them with oil in the name of the Lord.”* (James 5:14). Jesus’ sending his disciples during his ministry would be a foretaste of the commissioning of the disciples after his resurrection to be “sent out” to continue Jesus’s ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing in the power of the Holy Spirit. While this ministry would often be well-received and bear much fruit, there would be countless episodes in which the apostles would face the same rejection that Jesus experienced in Nazareth. Even the Apostle Paul experienced a cool reception when he sought to preach the gospel in Athens: *“When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ At that point Paul left them.”* (Acts 17:32-33). As the Church of Jesus Christ seeks to remain faithful to this apostolic mission of bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to others, we will also face rejection and scoffing at the Word we proclaim; but Jesus’ instructions to “shake it off” remind us that our call is to be faithful to the mission set before us and not to be deterred when the results are not what we expected:

- “The command to shake the dust off our feet against those who will not receive us, or our message is a reminder that we are responsible for our obedience in mission, but not for the response of others or the results. We are not to force ourselves on other people or assume responsibility for their decision. At the same time, we are to understand, and to try to help them understand, the seriousness of their decision and response. Changing circumstances may dictate the timing of our moving on, of our accepting the fact of a negative response. The principle, however, does not change: It is God’s mission, and it is their decision.” – Williamson.

The mud rooms that my cousin builds serve the purpose of preventing dirt, sand, and other elements from entering one’s home and negatively impacting one’s living space, the act of shaking off the dust of rejection serves to remind us that we need

not be discouraged by rejection or results that do not meet our expectations. As our Lord faced rejection and continued in his ministry, our task as those called to continue his work is also to “shake it off,” so that we might move forward with the good news that frees us from all that would weigh us down or hold us back so that we might run the race that is set before us by the one who calls us to be faithful to his Word, trusting that through the Holy Spirit we will still accomplish abundantly far more than we could ever expect or imagine. Let us not be weighed down by discouragement; let us “shake it off” so that we might be free to love and serve our Lord and share his liberating word.

Amen.