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July 5, 2009

The Art of Ministry

Mark 6:7

Coming home seemed like a good idea. Jesus and the disciples had just completed a very successful road trip. Jesus had demonstrated his power over the destructive forces that threaten our lives. The raging storm had been calmed, evil spirits had been cast out, people ravaged by disease had been restored to health. The crowds had been large and responsive everywhere they went. This opening phase of Jesus' ministry was going very well indeed. Now Jesus could return to his home town of Nazareth as the local boy made good. Jesus and his disciples could relax and enjoy their success while preparing to go out on the road again.

Soon after their arrival Jesus did what he had done before in other places and went to the synagogue on the Sabbath to teach. It was after all Jesus' teaching that was at the heart of his ministry. It was the power of the Word that calmed the storm, cast out demons, and healed the sick. There was every reason to believe that this Word would also be well received in the hometown synagogue. But the response of the home folks was not very positive. Mark tells us that many listeners were astounded by what Jesus said but not in a good way.

Some scholars have pointed out that Jesus lived in what is called an honor/shame society. People of lowly origins were not permitted to speak in public. In Nazareth everyone knew that Jesus came from an ordinary family. For him to assume the authority of a teacher was seen as an act of sheer arrogance. The reports of Jesus' success in performing deeds of power also violated the rules of this society. Jesus was assuming authority that his community would never grant to someone of his background. Many took offense.

For the first time Jesus and his disciples have to come to terms with failure. The disciples are watching carefully to see how Jesus responds. If Jesus could just do one more mighty deed of power he could put the community leaders in their places. But the gospel writer tells us that Jesus was constrained by the unbelief of the people of Nazareth. Because they had no faith he could do no deed of power in that place.

Mark also tells us that Jesus makes no attempt to rescue his ministry in Nazareth. He accepts his rejection and moves on. This is for Jesus and the disciples an important teaching moment. What Jesus does in response to this failure will serve as a powerful model for the disciples in those times when they will experience failure and rejection for themselves. Jesus wants the disciples to understand that they, too, can accept rejection because in the end this ministry is not about them, it is all about God.

In the aftermath of the rejection in Nazareth Jesus sends the disciples on their first missionary journey. They are to travel in twos and do all the things that they had seen Jesus do. They are to preach repentance, cast out demons, and heal those whose lives are broken. It was the nature of this journey that they could not carry sufficient provisions. They must trust themselves to the hospitality of those

they serve. And Jesus tells them that they will experience rejection. They are to accept rejection by shaking the dust off their sandals and moving on. They can do that because the authority by which they work is not grounded in their talent, their education, or their place in society. It is the gift of God. This ministry is not about them. It is all about God.

Some years ago I made a trip to Guatemala where I met people who were working to improve the lives of the Mayan Indians who live at the bottom of that society. One of the people I met was a university professor named Julio Quann. He described for us the daunting challenges faced by those who were trying to bring meaningful change to that nation. Anyone suggesting constructive change was sure to be put on one of the hit lists of the various death squads. He shared with our group that even though he was a geography professor with no political aspirations he was on numerous hit lists. He took a trained guard dog with him everywhere he went.

There was a woman in the group who was overwhelmed by what she perceived to be the hopelessness of Professor Quann's situation. She asked him why he didn't give up and leave the country. The professor seemed a bit miffed by her suggestion, but I'll never forget his reply. He said, "We have a saying in our country that the impossible things take a little longer." He then went on to describe the impossibility of the task which confronted Jesus and the disciples. The art of ministry is not a matter of producing success in the eyes of the world. The art of ministry is found in moving beyond the conventional categories of success and failure or acceptance and rejection. We can't do that until we realize that it is not about us. It is all about God.

Paul makes this point in the 12th chapter of 2 Corinthians. Paul's ministry among the Corinthians is challenged by a delegation of church officials from Jerusalem. They do not charge him with heresy, but they call into question his professional skills. They ridicule his speaking ability and leadership qualities. The impact of these charges is to undermine Paul's authority as the founder and spiritual guide of the Corinthian church. In this passage Paul responds to the charges that have been leveled against him. He does not defend himself by listing his accomplishments or pointing to his professionalism. Instead he parodies his critics by boasting about the wrong things. Instead of listing the qualities which demonstrate his strength and power, he lists those things which show his weakness and vulnerability. His ministry is not grounded in his education, talent, or skill. It is grounded in the grace of God. Paul has learned that in those moments when he is most weak he is also most aware of God's grace. Paul has learned the art of ministry which has eluded his critics. He knows that it is not about him. It is all about God.

John Calvin referred to this passage when he addressed King Francis I in his preface to *The Institutes*. Calvin was issuing a plea for justice on behalf of those who were being persecuted for their faith in France. He reminded Francis that the purpose of the office of the King was not to promote his own glory but to serve the glory of God. Calvin said it like this:

Thus before God nothing remains for us to boast of, save his mercy, whereby we have been received into hope of eternal salvation through no merit of our own...But our doctrine must tower unvanquished above all the glory and above all the might of the world, for it is not of us, but of the living God... (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Prefatory Address to King Francis, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, page 12).

It is all about God.