

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
July 8th, 2018  
7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: When Ministry Flops  
Rev. John Crow

Ezekiel 2:1-7  
Psalm 123  
2 Corinthians 12:1-10  
Mark 6:1-6

When I was about ten years old, there was a girl who moved to my school, and I thought she was pretty cute. As it turned out, not only was she in my class, but she also joined the same gymnastics school that I went to. I remember once getting ready to do a vault when I noticed her watching me. I thought I'd show her just how good I was. Instead, I wound up showing her how amazing I was at the face plant! I still remember her barely suppressed laugh. I must have been beet red. Can anyone relate to that? Or there was the time at West Point when we finished our final group computer science project, only to have it not run on our professor's computer. We have all had flops—sometimes monumental flops. We all know the adage, “To err is human.” It's practically our defining feature.

It's not so easy to laugh about flops in ministry, however. We've all heard of churches suffering serious setbacks due to the moral failings of their pastor. I've personally been involved in ministry efforts that some would say have flopped.

(Some might say I'm flopping right now...) But flop or not, it isn't nearly as consequential as how we answer the question of *who Christ is*. Yes, this question came up a few weeks ago in Pastor Thelander's sermon about Jesus calming the storm two chapters earlier in Mark. Today's reading in Mark is still dealing with this question, so we will return to it again, along with the ramifications of our answer to that question, and the difference our answer makes when ministry flops.

For most of us, it's a simple matter to say who we are. I am John Crow. I am the son of Stan and Donna Crow. I am a pastor. I am the husband of Mindy, and the father of four boys. But even for me, the question of who I am can get a little messy. Am I really the father of four boys, or just three, since my oldest is adopted? I am technically still an Army officer, though all that means is my name is on the list of the Individual Ready Reserve. I am a pastor, but I am also an administrator for a financial advisor. With respect to Jesus, the question of who He is gets messy indeed, and unlike with me, it matters A LOT.

What is particularly interesting about the Gospel of Mark is that this question of Jesus' identity seems to be an area of emphasis. In chapter 3 His relatives say He has gone crazy, while the scribes accused Him of being possessed. In chapter 4 the

disciples wondered who He was, that the wind and the sea obeyed Him. In today's reading, Jesus refers to himself as a prophet, while teaching in the synagogue like a rabbi. The congregation at the synagogue that day knew of Jesus as a healer and miracle-worker, but they also knew Him as the son of Mary and a carpenter. And of course, in chapter 8 Jesus will ask the disciples who He is, and Peter, rising to the occasion, finally gets it right.

But wait, so did just about everyone else! Other than those who thought He was insane or demon-possessed, every other description above is accurate. In addition to these, today we often hear that Jesus was simply "a good man." The problem with these true descriptions is that Peter's is the only one that addresses the most important aspects of who Jesus is. "Thou art the Christ" (Mark 8:29). A rabbi, a healer, a prophet, a good man...these are all wonderful things to be, but frankly, we would be wasting our time here today if that is all Jesus was. We don't worship prophets. We don't base our eternal salvation on a good man. And we definitely don't partake of the body and blood of a rabbi.

Anything short of acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, God's eternal son, who is the very Word of God, who died for our sins and rose again, to one day return in

victory, is missing the mark. Close isn't good enough. Who it is that commands our faith is an all-or-nothing prospect. Putting our faith in the wrong person or thing is no better than having no faith at all. And it doesn't even make sense to claim that Jesus was only a prophet, or healer, or teacher, or a good man, because He claimed to be the Messiah and expected others to follow Him, so either He WAS all that He claimed to be, or he was in fact crazy or demon-possessed. One can't even logically claim that Jesus was purposely deceiving people, because it was obvious from an early stage in His ministry that those in power were against Him, so He was most likely headed for prison or death. No sane person would choose that. Thus, the only logical options we have left are that Jesus was insane or demon-possessed; or He really was the Messiah.

This is why Jesus is so threatening. There is no middle ground. Either He was someone of no consequence who should have been long forgotten by history, or He is the ONLY person in history who matters. The passing of some 2,000 years is inconsequential. It in no way diminishes His importance to the life of every man, woman, and child on Earth. The Son of God, our Messiah, demands to be at the center of our lives, because if you think about it, what else could possibly compare? Do you have something more important to base your life around? Yeah, I didn't think so.

Because Jesus clearly is the Messiah, it seems particularly odd that today's gospel reading paints a picture in which Jesus' ministry in Nazareth flopped. It was so bad, the Scripture even records in verse 6 that Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith, which was an expression of His humanness, and most likely the pain of rejection by those who knew Him best. And Mark places this event right after Jesus healed a demoniac, a hemorrhaging woman, and even raised a girl from the dead. Talk about a change in fortunes! So what are we to make of this story in terms of Jesus' ministry, and what does it teach us about ministering today in the face of failure?

First, I think we must acknowledge that while it didn't appear to go well, Jesus' ministry in Nazareth didn't really flop. He still taught, and still performed a few minor miracles before leaving. He "couldn't" do more miracles there because the natural environment of miracles is faith, and there was little of that to be found there. In other words, miracles would have been out of place in Nazareth at that time. Sure, it would have been nice if those who knew Him as a child had accepted Jesus as more than just Mary's son (which by the way, was an insult in that day, since the normal reference would have been to being Joseph's son, even if

Joseph had passed away), but we must be open to the results that weren't recorded for us. We don't know who may have come to faith in Christ as a result of that time. James, the brother of Jesus, may have been there, and he became the head of the mother church in Jerusalem after the ascension. So if this visit to Nazareth turned out to be a key moment in the spiritual life of James, then that alone would have made the whole trip a complete success. Those who were healed may very well have come to faith in Christ.

But I can't base my entire argument of Jesus' success in Nazareth on suppositions of what may have happened. So let us also consider what we know. By placing this event immediately before the sending of the twelve, Mark highlights the powerful lesson this was for Jesus' disciples. They got to see Jesus Himself being rejected, which would help when they faced rejection. When He sent them, Jesus even gave instructions for what to do when people reject them, so it seems fitting that Jesus would experience rejection Himself before that. And Isaiah 55:10-11 tells us that Scripture always accomplishes what God intends when it is shared, so we can take it on faith that despite appearances, Jesus' visit to Nazareth wasn't actually a total flop.

I actually think this passage in Mark chapter six has more to do with the nature of the listeners, rather than on the failure of Jesus' ministry in Nazareth. We aren't told exactly what happens, but there seems to be a shift on the part of the congregation from amazement at the wisdom of Jesus's teaching (as well as his reputation for doing miraculous deeds), to offense at His presumption. If your plumber started teaching you about astro-physics, you might not know what to make of it; and we live in a very open society, where everyone has access to materials on any subject, and anyone can rise above the economic level they were born into. This was not the case through most of history. In Jesus' day, sons were expected to follow in their father's work—especially first borns. First born sons were also expected to take care of the family if something happened to the father, which could have been the case with Joseph. This is only speculation now, but if Joseph had passed away by this point, then there could be some animosity towards Jesus among those who knew the family, and saw that Jesus appeared to be neglecting His family duties. And now He seemed to be passing himself off as someone greater than He really was. If Jesus had studied under a respected Hebrew teacher, then the congregation might have had some context for His teaching. But at the same time, they knew His reputation since He began his ministry, so His teaching should have come as no surprise.

The transition seems so stark, that when I first started thinking about it, I figured there were two groups of people; those who were amazed, and those who took offense. But that's not what Mark records. It was the same people. They let Him teach at the synagogue. They were impressed by what He had to say, but then somewhere, things started to shift. The congregation became scoffers. Like the people of Israel described in today's Old Testament reading from Ezekiel chapter two, the people in the synagogue that day were rebellious and stubborn.

So one lesson to learn when ministry seems to flop, is that we cannot control how it will be received. Scoffers are everywhere. At times, our role in ministry may be to plant seeds in people's hearts. We may never see the fruit from those seeds. On the other hand, we may be the beneficiaries of seeds that were planted long ago by others. This is often what happens when our ministries see fruit. We certainly can't take the credit for what results. We are simply responsible to be faithful to the ministry to which the Holy Spirit has called us. However, merely acting out of a sense of duty is the lowest degree of obedience, but it beats disobedience. And it is easier to be faithful in ministry if we are not fearful of the scoffers, as Ezekiel 2:6 instructs. So it is best that we expect a negative reaction, while hoping for the opposite.



Like Jesus, we also must carry on in the face of a flop. Jesus didn't retreat from ministry after Nazareth; quite the opposite—He launched the next phase! Now I'm not saying that we stubbornly press on without considering making changes. Not every ministry idea is a good one. Some ministries are the right one, but at the wrong place or time. Some are simply implemented poorly. Some just gets the steps out of order. And some ministries simply run their course. Promise Keepers was VERY successful for a decade or so, but no longer exists today. I can't definitively say what happened, but maybe it did what it was meant to do. It is not necessarily a bad thing for a given ministry to fade away, as long as those involved stay faithful, and move on into other ways to serve.

Abandoning ministry, like a hurt puppy hiding away to lick its wounds, is the wrong reaction to a ministry flop. This reaction typically results from bruised pride. So does pointing fingers, because it deflects blame to protect one's own ego. But as I said earlier, a ministry may seem to fail even if everyone involved did exactly what they were supposed to. A better reaction is to acknowledge that we are more mature Christians for having attempted ministry—even a ministry that failed. Lastly, just as we don't know what eventually came of Jesus' ministry in

Nazareth, we can never know what will result from our ministry efforts.

Something that looks like a flop this week may suddenly turn around the next. Or people who were scoffers may turn around and be the future leaders. There is an element of mystery in ministry that we should never disregard.

Before we receive the Eucharist today we will say the creed. Let us pay particular attention to what the creed says about Jesus, because if He is anything less than what it says, then the Eucharist is no more than empty ceremony. We might as well be serving burgers and coke, for all the good it will do us. The same is true if we participate in the Eucharist as scoffers. Jesus can be who He claimed to be, but if we don't believe that, then again, communion has no value for us. If you haven't decided for yourself who you believe Christ to be, then you are in the right place! I would be delighted to try and help you find the answers you seek. I may be a little biased, but that doesn't mean I'm wrong. And this isn't like deciding whether or not you believe in global warming, because the Holy Spirit will speak to your spirit if you are willing to listen. So while there is plenty of external evidence for Jesus being who He said He was, belief needn't be based on evidence alone. In fact, I don't know if it can be.

If the conditions are met of Jesus Christ being the Messiah, and your belief in such, then the Eucharist cannot flop, because it is the grace of God intended for us. Nothing can impede it. Just as nothing can impede any ministry you engage in, when the Holy Spirit is in it, even if it has all the appearances of a flop.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.