

Year B, Proper 9
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When reading the scriptures it is always tempting to place ourselves in the position of the righteous. Had we lived “back then”, we would have made the right choice, would have done the right thing. Infrequently do we recognize our shadow selves. For example, when reading the Parable of the Prodigal Son, how many of us see ourselves as the older brother? When hearing about Jesus’ conflicts with the Pharisees, who has stood up to defend those who are portrayed as enemies of Jesus? Today, the questions may be different but the dynamics are the same- living the life of Jesus is more difficult than we care to admit; it comes with costs we do not desire to incur.

The people of Nazareth prove consistent with most of the Gospel characters- they reject Jesus. Jesus gave his hometown two chances to receive his message. Both times they said, “No thanks”. We previously heard about Jesus’ family trying to restrain him, to which he famously replied, “And who are my mother and brothers and sisters but those who do the will of God?” (Mark 3:31-35). Today we hear again that he is in his hometown, and again they reject him. While Jesus remains “Amazed at their unbelief” (Mark 6:6), he also did not stay and stew about it. He moved on but did so in an interesting way, by “send(ing) them out two by two” (Mark 6:7).

Before we race ahead to being sent out two by two, it is worth recognizing the people who rejected Jesus. These were, after all, the people of his hometown. If you think New Orleans is a small town, you should try Nazareth two thousand years ago. There were very few secrets. They knew *everything* about *everyone*. So when Jesus returned as a wise teacher and worker of wonders, they had a difficult time reconciling the new Jesus with the old Jesus that they knew as a carpenter; so much so that they “took offense at him” (6:3b), in the “who does he think he is?” kind of way. In their rejection of Jesus, they reveal their belief in the false notion that the expert is always “from out of town”.

Several years ago I participated in an excellent program called the Clergy Leadership Project. Over the course of two years we spent four weeks learning from the best and brightest from various academic fields from business to

international conflict mediation. It was helpful to apply some cross-discipline learning to the church. One of the clearest takeaways concerned how humans tend to approach big issues. Often times we apply technical fixes to problems that require an adaptive approach. For example, when I have computer problems the Vestry does not need to form a committee. I just call ResTech and someone comes and fixes the computer.

Technical Solutions

Looking for quick solutions.

Driven by Experts.

Divide problem into components.

Provide answers.

Acceptance.

So many of our big hopes require more than a technical fix. They require an adaptive approach:

Adaptive Responses

Long term introspection

Input from all concerned

“Big tent” thinking

Look for better questions

Resistanceⁱ

What I am suggesting is that Jesus’ hometown people were not necessarily “bad” people. Maybe they were applying a technical response to something that demanded an adaptive change. In applying the technical they miss out on something very big- The Kingdom of God.

Why does this matter since we are the disciples who have been sent out two by two? Well, what if we are not the good disciples but instead the people of Nazareth, the ones who reject Jesus and his message. Without even knowing it, we could be repeating the same mistake of Jesus’ hometown people. We are rejecting the Kingdom of God, not consciously, but all the same we are missing what is right in front of our eyes because we are not realizing to the full what God has offered us.

Being a follower of Jesus is adaptive work, and it is never as simple as “do this one thing”. So many people recognize that something in their lives is missing, but when we call upon Jesus we want him to do a quick fix so we can go back to living life on our own terms. The desire for a quick fix is a technical approach wherein Jesus the expert can quickly “fix us” and go on his way. But this is not where the Kingdom of God is to be found. To receive Jesus and his message is a long game, one that requires a lot of us who say we want Jesus in our lives; it requires that we receive Jesus on his terms, not ours, and amend our lives accordingly. When we do this, there is life to be had. Amen.

¹ List adopted from an article “How Do We See the Changes that Are Needed?” by The Rev. Jim Papile that was published by Episcopal Café website on July 4, 2018 as General Convention was preparing to begin in Austin, TX. I went through the program at the same time as Jim.