

Whether we want to or not; whether we do it consciously or unconsciously, we all read scripture with a bias. We interpret what we are reading based on what we have known from the past, what we are living through in the present, and what we expect our lives will be like in the future. Because of this, no two people read a passage from the Bible in quite the same way. So I come to this Gospel reading acknowledging that I do so as someone who just returned from visiting the place where I grew up. A place I moved away from in my early 20s. I come as someone who has offended many by her choice of profession and her commitment to God's extravagant welcome. And so I come to this passage wrestling with the temptation to read too much of my own stuff into the story.

Especially given the fact that here in Mark we see Jesus doing a shocking thing. He behaves in a way that some might deem inappropriate. When his efforts to heal the sick and care for the lonely are met not only with distrust, but with outright belittling, Jesus, with great disappointment, simply turns away. He doesn't stop what he's doing. He helps as much as is possible, but when he has done all that he can, albeit limited by the poor reception of others, he then simply moves on.

The people ask where he got all of his wisdom from and how he is as powerful as he seems to be. And they just cannot accept that Jesus, a carpenter, can teach with

authority and cause miracles to happen. The Greek word ἄτιμος (atimos) is an adjective that means "dishonored," "disgraced," or "without honor." In ancient Greek society, being labeled as ἄτιμος indicated a loss of social standing and respect. Jesus was atimos to those who had known him the longest. He is a disgrace. "You can't find honor (or ti-may in Greek) in your hometown, family or among your people" he says. Only atimos - despise or disrespect.

But why? Why can't a prophet find honor in and among their own. Perhaps those who know a person best just can not be challenged by someone who they know has issues of their own. We don't know what Jesus was like as a kid. He probably made mistakes, hurt people's feelings, felt a little grandiose at being dubbed "the Son of God". There are a lot of siblings listed here in this passage. And, each one probably had a story he or she could tell about their brother. Perhaps it wasn't so much that Jesus' friends and family did not believe that the power of God could heal. It is more likely that they did not trust that Jesus could be a conduit for that power.

Richard Rohr, who I've been quoting quite a bit these days, has said that "throughout history, especially in the case of female wisdom figures, prophets and truth-tellers, the Sage has often been mis-trusted by society." That is so, says

Rohr, because such individuals speak to the profound depths of things, including life's complexities, and the parts of ourselves we do not like. Prophets inspire and tell uncomfortable truths which does not make them very popular.

You may not be aware, but there are prophets right here in this very room. You may be sitting next to one. Or, you may BE one. The portraits that circle us from the window sills today are definitely of people who have prophesied. Our church had these portraits taken of people from Midcoast Maine who identify as Queer people of faith. There are ten of them and they travel across the state as teaching tools for churches and organization that want to learn from these prophets. Each one has a personal story printed alongside of it. They were in such demand during the first half of this year that we could not have them on display ourselves, but here they are today. These are folks who challenge the dominant voices of our culture and society. Each and every one of them have known disdain; have been rejected by some and disrespected by many. We talk about the rights and needs of LGBTQIA people, especially during the season of Pride, and some might find that uncomfortable. Some might think it inappropriate, or just not want to hear it talked about too often. But the thing is, the experiences of LGBTQIA people are human experiences that we all can learn and grow from. The insights of those who have struggled to speak of the Gospel in welcoming tones provide growth and healing

for those who are receptive to that message. Sages of that sort, “compassionately work for the betterment of themselves and others, sharing their wisdom to heal, transform, and uplift [all of] those around them” (from Rohr).

Jesus didn't attack those who would not listen to him. And he probably knew enough about all of them that he could have gone right to the heart of things, but he didn't. He walked away, and he told his disciples to do the same. What do we do if others do not value us, especially if we are doing our very best to model our lives after Jesus? We don't puff ourselves up in an attempt to prove them wrong. We don't drop out of sight in shame. We need to do what Jesus told us to do. We need to “shake it off”.

He says “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.” Shake it off, he says. Move on and then get on with the work that needs doing.

I'm reminded of the Taylor Swift song written in response to the mean things that people have said about her. Swift insists that:

the players gonna play, play, play, play, play

And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate

Baby, I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake

I shake it off, I shake it off (hoo-hoo-hoo)

We also have a passage from the Book of Ezekiel this morning; a story of when Yahweh called upon Ezekiel to speak truth to the people. I like the part when the spirit literally lifts him to his feet so he can clearly hear what God has to say. Sometimes that's exactly what I need to really hear the Holy One.

There are a couple differences between Ezekiel's experience and Jesus' that I appreciate. Unlike in the passage from the Gospel of Mark, in Ezekiel God says that those who refuse to hear will nevertheless know that there has been a prophet among them. The fuller text of that passage includes God saying to Ezekiel "you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briars 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 or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house."

An opinion columnist recently wrote a piece for the NY Times that I thought described this concept well when writing about the current political climate in the

US. She said "It can make professional critics sound like Chicken Little, always claiming the end is near until no one cares to hear our squawking. But it is time to squawk." She goes on to say that "It is not just that my side — the ideas I believe in like bodily autonomy, economic justice and diversity — are losing in the marketplace of ideas." What matters most is that our electoral politics no longer care about representing [such] ideas (Professor Tressie McMillan Cottom).

Like Ezekiel, like some cultural critics, Jesus also speaks whether anyone is listening, and then he boldly directs his disciples to do the same. He instructs them to simply move on when they and their ministry are not welcomed. Their mission is clear: heal the sick, teach people how to change their lives and seek fair treatment and justice for all people. And when that is not embraced with open arms, move on to some-one or some-where else because there will always be people in need of love.

The transformative power of Jesus' ministry even here in Camden depends so much on a willingness to look and listen for God's voice even if it comes to us through means we would never have imagined. We each will read this story from our own particular places, our own particular bias, and the question is, how will we respond to it? Do we see ourselves as one of the disciples, or as Jesus, being

disregarded? Or can we challenge ourselves to recognize a bit of ourselves in the family and friends who did the disregarding? Can we speak of compassion, healing, and reconciliation even when we have been wounded by those who know us best and longest, or do we need to take a step back and shake it off in order to move forward?

Each one of us must answer in our own way. And may the Holy Spirit guide us and fill us with wisdom and grace as we do so. Amen.