

When Your Mission is Rejected

Mark 6:1-13

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The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. ²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

The Mission of the Twelve

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If 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.' ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. (NRSV)

I

In the late 1870s, a young man named Vincent van Gogh decided to become a minister in the Dutch Reformed church. At first glance his decision to become a minister made a lot of sense, because his father and several uncles were ministers, which more or less made ministry the family business. Moreover Vincent was a devout Christian, with a genuine wish to serve God. For a while he devoted himself to Bible study, spending many hours reading the biblical material. He gave talks at prayer meetings and began preaching here and there.

But almost immediately he ran into problems.

- To become a minister he needed theological training at the school of theology in Amsterdam. But when he tried to study for the entrance exams, all the Greek, Latin, and mathematics put him off. Even though one of his uncles helped him study, after fifteen months it became clear that this kind

of rigorous academic study was not a good fit for him. He later described it as “the worst time of my life.”

- Next he applied to join a mission school, but again failed to qualify.
- Despite the roadblocks, a mission organization agreed to send him to one of the most impoverished and inhospitable areas of western Europe: a coal mining region in Belgium. There he worked as a lay minister, where his job was to preach the gospel and visit the sick. Because of his deep compassion for the coal miners and their families, he shared most of his food and clothing with them to try to alleviate their poverty.

But the sponsoring mission organization did not approve of how Vincent was living the gospel. They thought his radical lifestyle was “undermining the dignity” that a pastor should have—and after about a year they fired him for interpreting the teachings of Jesus too literally. Vincent van Gogh sank into despair. He felt that his faith was now destroyed. Moreover he had no income to support himself. “They think I’m a madman because I wanted to be a true Christian,” he told a friend. “They turned me out like a dog, saying that I was causing a scandal.”¹

When have you followed what you thought was God’s call, only to encounter roadblocks and difficulties? When have you tried to engage the grand, overarching mission of God, only to encounter so much opposition, so much criticism, that you wanted to quit and go do something else?

II

Jesus had two occupations during his lifetime. His first occupation was working as a carpenter, making things like doorframes, wooden tools, and the like. We don’t know how this occupation went for him because the gospels don’t say. Was carpentry easy or

¹ “Vincent van Gogh,” <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Vincent-van-Gogh>, accessed January 9, 2016.

hard, rewarding or boring for him? Did his customers like him or criticize him? We don't know.

We know much more about his second occupation, which was working as an itinerant teacher and healer for God, mostly in the regions of Galilee and Judea. This occupation did not turn out to be easy for Jesus. We humans have a seemingly endless capacity to resist God, and nowhere is the human resistance to God clearer than in the people who resisted the ministry of Jesus. According to the gospel of Mark:

- Satan harassed him for forty days in the wilderness.
- The disciples often misunderstood him and the nature of his mission. Especially in Mark, the male disciples come across as thick-headed numbskulls who didn't get it, who jockeyed for power and privilege, and who abandoned him when things got really bad.
- The religious leaders down in Judea hassled him about questions of purity, divorce, the nature of authority, taxes, and the resurrection. Finally these religious leaders conspired to destroy him and terminate his mission.
- They basically succeeded. Eventually Jesus was betrayed by his friends, arrested by his enemies, sentenced to die on false charges, and publicly humiliated on a cross by the Roman empire.
- The misunderstanding by the disciples was so discouraging, the harassment by the religious leaders was so exhausting, the opposition to his mission was so strenuous, the dying on a cross was so painful, that in the final moments of his life all the frustration and disappointment poured out of him and he exclaimed: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Here in the sixth chapter most of that frustration and disappointment has not yet happened. For Jesus, most of that heartache is still in the future. But some of it begins here in chapter six. In this story he goes back to his home town of Nazareth where everybody knows him. These are his friends from way back, so you'd expect they would be proud of him and would support him anyway they could. Not so. When he guest preaches in the town's synagogue, they're critical of what he says. They question his intelligence

and wisdom. They think his words are offensive. They reject him. They oppose him. To a large extent, the mission of Jesus failed in his hometown.

III

Mission work isn't always easy. Probably you've learned this. Many of you, in your own ways, are engaged in the grand and compelling mission of God. You know a little about your neighbors and are sensitive to their needs. You raise and teach children in ways that will hopefully help them become receptive to God. You serve at Ten Thousand Villages or at the Depot. You work on the Community Relations Commission. You care for sick people. You pursue justice, whether through the law or through advocacy. You shape the minds of young people. You work for the public welfare of towns and cities in northern Indiana. And you do it all in the name of Christ. But it's not always easy work and sometimes you're deeply discouraged.

Perhaps it was the disappointing experience in his hometown that led Jesus to tell the disciples they too will experience opposition. When you go out and participate in the mission of God, he says, people will sometimes reject you. Sometimes they will not welcome you. They won't listen to you. They won't like what you're offering them. When that happens, don't get too bent out of shape about it. If they don't want you, you don't need to hang around. The best thing might be for you to move on to another group of people who will be more receptive to you and to the kind of work you do for God's mission in the world. Your resources are limited, after all. When you meet strenuous opposition, consider a different location, or a different strategy, or even a different goal.

This is what Vincent van Gogh did. His disappointments with trying to be a minister were so deep, and the opposition so broad, that he changed course. He changed occupations and turned to something that had long interested him. He started to draw and eventually to paint. By 1880 he discovered that his true vocation was to be a visual artist. If he could not bring consolation to other people through pastoral ministry, then he would bring consolation through art. As he wrote to his brother Theo, "I want to give the wretched a brotherly message." Van Gogh's goal was to serve God through art, hoping

that his own art would lead people to God.² For the rest of his short life van Gogh focused on painting, sometimes with such focused energy that he produced three paintings a day.³

That doesn't mean he had an easy life. Van Gogh remained poor and struggled with physical, mental, and relational issues for the rest of his life. He smoked too much and drank too much. Sometimes he was hard to get along with. And yet from all that anyone can tell, he had found his true vocation which he pursued passionately for as long as he lived. By the time he died at age 37, he had produced over 2,000 paintings, drawings, and sketches.

IV

Mission isn't always easy, yet it can be highly fruitful. Look at the last sentence of our text for today and especially notice the word "many" which appears twice. As the disciples pursued the mission Jesus sent them to do, they "cast out *many* demons, and anointed with oil *many* who were sick and cured them" (6:13, emphasis added). Many! Your mission, my mission, our mission, can have many results! Thanks to the exquisite abilities of the Holy Spirit, the little things we do can cause many good and wonderful things to happen.

When have your mission efforts produced many fruits? Through the gracious work of God, how have your endeavors led to many students taught, many persons healed, many lives touched, and many acts of service rendered in the name of Christ? Right now, what excellent and beautiful art are you producing for the mission of God?

² <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-van-gogh-vincent.htm>, accessed January 9, 2016.

³ *Van Gogh: Brush with Genius*, directed by François Bertrand. Caméra Lucida and La Géode Productions, 2009.