Sermon Mark 6 - Shake the dust off your feet and carry on.

If you live long enough, attempt to do and be things in your life, you will surely encounter failure. People fail every day. Failure in relationships, marriages, failures at work, failures in health. Just about everyone can identify with failure, and we know it is hard to cope with in our success oriented world. It's also the way of our world that other people's failures can make people feel better about their own. The media will even revel in the famous falling from grace and encourage public opinion to join in. Sad it is that failure too often provokes glee and gloating rather than sympathy.

It's also an odd reflection on our society that failure in time can morph into success. Watching The Antiques Roadshow this week on TV, someone brought in a dinner menu from the Titanic. The appraiser said it was a rare relic from that disaster, the sinking of the unsinkable ship with the loss of 1514 lives. This week on the Antiques Roadshow a dinner menu from the Titanic was estimated to be valued at between 50 and 100,000 dollars. And what with permanent museums and traveling exhibitions, that particular failure has over time acquired a success of a kind.

Failure can teach or it can destroy. It was thought that there were some who had been involved in the design of Titanic tool their own lives through remorse and ignominy. In some cultures failure requires payment with your life, not a chance at redemption or learning a lesson and moving on determined to do better. Famously Japanese warriors were expected to commit suicide by hara-kiri, as payment for failure which was unacceptable and unexpected.

In today's gospel Jesus experienced failure himself and also expected his disciples to fail. Some versions of The Bible name this section "The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth" and in the last part of this passage, Jesus gives his disciples instructions about what to do when they are rejected.

He has been moving from one success to another in his ministry. Mark has been describing Jesus' most amazing miracles - calming the storm, healing man possessed with demons, raising Jairus' daughter back to life. Now, searching for some retreat time, Jesus heads back to his hometown of Nazareth.

And back in his home synagogue, Jesus begins to teach. And unlike in the previous places where the people are astonished at his teaching, in Nazareth they are astounded at him 'How dare this local boy, assume such authority?" they ask. “Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judah, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?” They were offended at him.

This is the third time Jesus was to experience failure in his ministry. In Mark 3:21, his own family labeled him crazy and tried to restrain him. In Mark 3:31, his mother and brothers and sisters try again to remove him from his teaching ministry. Here in his home town, he meets naked rejection, prompting him to utter his famous line, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own relatives, and in his own house."

Then turning to commission his disciples as they set out in mission he tells what to do and what to expect. Go out two by two into the countryside preaching and casting out unclean spirits. Travel only with a staff. Carry no bread, no bag, no money in their belts. Wear sandals and don't even take a spare tunic.

That's the good bit. Then Jesus prepares them for failure when he says, "Whoever will not receive you nor hear you, as you depart from there, shake off the dust that is under your feet for a testimony against them." They won't be immune from failure because they are going in his name. Jesus knows that failure will be a real possibility. His words are to show them how to carry on in when it happens. Nobody likes to hear they are going to have to face failure in life.

Understanding this helps us know how to carry on when we also fail. I sometimes think Jesus inspired those public information wartime signs which hold up today. Keep Calm and Carry On!

Jesus tells his disciples not to fear failure. Shake off the dust and go on. The lesson is to turn failure into something good and positive and meaningful. Because failure can lead to better things. Vincent Van Gogh never sold a single painting in his life, Mozart wrote his requiem while dying of pneumonia and Handel wrote the Messiah while on his last legs after a stroke. Both were living in abject poverty. Just as all of these were driven to give their best despite adversity, so must we shake off the dust and carry on.
Failure can also be creative when it jolts us out of safe or stale routines. Sometimes courage is needed to face real change. A great failure can be the influence that enables us to risk and change.

Failure can be failure for Christ. Sometimes failure happens when we are doing everything in our power to serve Christ. Some modern theologies promise health, wealth and success if we will only follow Christ. But he promised that his disciples would experience the same kind of rejection that he experienced. Let us never forget that almost everyone of the first twelve suffered martyrdom for Christ. Failure is good when the failure is for Christ's sake.

As Theodore Roosevelt said, "Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat" (From Knute Larson, "Dancing With Defeat," Leadership, Fall 1993, 104-107).

Failure is not the end of the world. Failure is not a debilitating disease that ruins us for eternity. In fact, we should not be afraid to fail. We should expect failure at times. Then exercise Jesus' ritual of failure - shake the dust and go on.

Ernest Hemingway said: "Life breaks all of us, but some of us are strong in the broken places."

Strong in the broken places. That should encourage all of us who have ever been visited by anxiety and loss, pain, and dread.

In today's epistle Paul's letter to the Corinthians tells of a man who has seen and experienced the third heaven. We now know that he made reference to himself, though we remain ignorant of the specifics of his experience. In this Paul is following a directive from God.

Second Corinthians is one of the most fascinating texts in the Bible. It is entirely about Paul reflecting on his own brokenness, his waning ability to cope with unnamed infirmities. Three times he petitions God to relieve him of the issues that oppress him; and three times, God reminded him that he has all the gifts he needs to cope.

We do not know what Paul's thorn was, (some scholars believe it was blinding migraines) but he communicates his understanding that it is better, with God's help, to bear our human frailties than it is to glory in our incompetencies. It is in these periods of suffering that we are drawn to Him and reminded of His promises: He will supply our needs; all things will work together for good to those who are called according to His purpose; and His grace will always be sufficient.

Life may take its toll. We can cane in or be strengthened by it, knowing God is with us as we try out best to live righteous lives.

As Hemingway said, life breaks all of us, yet many of us are strong in the broken places.

AMEN