

DISHONORED, UNWELCOME

Mark 6:1-13

Following World War II, a small Michigan town advertised for a doctor to come and make a home with them, becoming available to heal the people. Ted Karikomi responded, having been recently graduated as a D.O., Doctor of Osteopathy, after having been refused a place at any other medical school. Though he had changed his first name to conform to the national tradition then in place, his family name obviously connected him to the very recent enemy, even as his face betrayed him as an outsider. He found himself dishonored as a doctor and unwelcome in the community but grateful that no physical violence had been visited upon him and his family. He persisted, waiting for any and every opportunity to serve, wobbling on the margins of poverty and hunger.

Late one Saturday evening, he finally received a call. Mispronouncing his last name, the voice asked if he was a doctor. Affirming that he was and fairly certain that the caller did not recognize the letters following his name, the doctor asked how he might help. An accident had occurred and one of the town leaders was in great need of medical attention. Because it was a holiday weekend, other doctors, even those from a nearby university, were unavailable, could he come? Dr. Karikomi went immediately to the hospital and attended to the injured man. Thereafter, he began to receive other calls for help and over the years, he became a trusted member of his church and community where he remained for the remainder of his life. Though the story may appear to be ripped from a trite Hollywood screenplay, it is true.

The twelve needed to know that they, too, might be dishonored and unwelcome in the villages where they would be sent. Some would view them as obviously ill-equipped to travel and thus dependent upon the welfare on a people who had little already. Others would reject them, refusing the gospel, though they might offer minimal hospitality until the disciple would depart, with feet left unwashed.

These disciples had been warned by the experience of Jesus as he returned to Nazareth to minister to the people of his village. Many were impressed by Jesus but some remembered that he was little more than a carpenter's son. Jesus perceptively understood that "a prophet would be without honor in his hometown, among his family, even in her own house." Initial welcome might likely dwindle quickly into a failed mission with growing unbelief crowding out any blossoming faith.

The hometown experience of Jesus did not dissuade the disciples from responding to his call nor prevent the disciples from being able to cast out demons and heal the diseased. They were fruitful in their ministries and word of their leader spread to other villages and towns and cities, even to the palace of the vicious and vengeful King Herod.

As those baptized, we are called and sent, much like the disciples who surrounded Jesus, at least during the safe times of discipleship. Though much of Christianity has become professionalized, at its core, the apostolic call continues to be heard and lived by fishermen, tax collectors, women of doubtful character, even those who, like Saul of Tarsus, seek to root out and persecute followers of Jesus. The Spirit of God works in and through many, transforming them into bearers of the gospel---bearers of the word. There are missionaries who are called and sent to bear the Word through Bible study and preaching. There are more who teach school, provide medical care, raise community health standards, build and run orphanages, and even create water systems for hospitals as well as dental clinics. The latter, more specific mission is mentioned because people in this congregation have carried out such ministry over the years to the people of Maua.

And have they been honored for their efforts? Were they always welcomed in the community they sought to serve? Or was there suspicion and even shame on the part of some who viewed the people who came from far away as a measure of judgment on the community's abilities to care for its people? In the instance of Jesus in Nazareth, it is evident that the villagers could not move beyond the identity of Jesus as hometown carpenter, son of old Joseph, and were thus not available to most of the ministry of Jesus. There is a good reason why the bishop does not appoint pastors to the congregations who nurtured them in their sometimes disobedient childhoods and occasionally wild youth. It is difficult to respect the preacher whom one remembers being caught in the bathroom smoking pot on a mission trip to Mexico.

Jesus is rejected as prophet and healer in Nazareth, and other gospels recount how his words so angered the villagers that they were ready and quite able to throw him off a nearby cliff. The response of the villagers, according to all the gospel writers, was understood by Jesus who realizes that he will be able to do little among the Nazaretheans, his kin, and even his family. Another must be raised up to serve them.

Jesus further understood that, generally, good news might not be honored or welcomed in the villages through which he would travel, people

to whom the disciples would be sent. The reception of gospel would depend less on the speaker than the hearer, which remains a truth even in our own age, and some would be unwilling or perhaps better, unable, to receive any good news of love and grace. Being unready, the disciples are called to move on to other fields of mission for the “harvest is plenty and the laborers few.” Perhaps God’s prevenient grace was further needed to open eyes and ears, heart and soul to the blessings God is eager to offer.

It may be that God’s grace even finds itself to be expressed effectively by people who profess no faith. They are not in church or temple or synagogue but perhaps the “nones” of the younger generations are doing the work of God without understanding that their efforts in building compassion and justice are God’s mission to the world. Admitting that religion has not always been so willing to offer such sacrificial service and, further, that, when taken over by those who seek power and wealth, glory and honor at the expense of all others, religion has created more harm than healing, we may even be grateful that God does work through some who would not count themselves faithful. After all, God does not need our empty praise on Sunday so much as God seeks those who will carry out God’s will in daily life.

Our gathering for the Faith and Film program often testifies to God’s will being taken up and carried out by some who do not necessarily count themselves disciples of anyone person or idea, except their own greed and fear. The ongoing question raised in discussion of the films is that of redemption. Who redeems the lost, the broken, the wounded? Most often, there are several characters who participate in helping the cinematic tale come to a satisfying ending, possibly portraying a truth that is often obscured in a larger population.

This past offering, the gatherings viewed *The Post*, ostensibly about the rescue from oblivion of a Washington D. C. newspaper. If only it could scoop all others with a story of national interest, it might convince investors to provide for more reporters and more updated equipment to build the newspaper into an influence reaching beyond the District. But the film comes to focus on the emerging character, the growing strength, the unexpected courage of a woman who inherited the business from both father and husband but considered herself greatly unqualified to be a publisher. Many provided much by way of advice but finally, she would be the one to remember the “mission” of the organization and to move forward into dangerous, threatening territory. Because most viewers remember the history of the moment, the film raises her up as the final redeemer of the

event. But except for her use of the word “mission” in a business prospectus, and two or three or four or five uses of “taking the Lord’s name in vain”, there is no expression of religion to be noted. Yet, there is redeeming, both of person and of truth.

While we may concede that gospel is greater than its bearers, the truth of gospel, according to this part of Mark, is that rejection will likely be at least a part of response to the labors of the disciples. The truth will set all free, but only if it is not just heard but received and believed. And lived. Gospel is always an invitation, from God and from those who seek to bear this gospel into the world. But the offering can be refused, even rejected, and we are called to merely move on. Apostles discerned early on that they might be dishonored and unwelcome, that to bear gospel into the world would raise threats that might cost them their lives. But that would not prevent them

The humbling truth of gospel is that it is for us but its sharing is not about us. Acceptance of God’s gracious love is not a signal of our success but a sign of the Spirit’s fruit. Dr. Craig Barnes, president of Princeton University writes about his years of preaching as listening to and reflecting the conversation enjoined by the congregation and God. It soon became clear that he was privy to only part of that conversation. Members of the every church with which he was privileged to serve would reflect upon the importance and sometimes the impact of what they had heard. Again, he would listen and marvel that much of what they had heard had not been spoken by him. He quickly learned to give thanks for the presence and power of the Spirit in his efforts. The reception of God’s blessing was not up to him, though he might participate in preparing another to grasp and enjoy. Rather than regret any lack of honor or welcome his words might evoke, no matter how diligently he has labored to offer a brilliant and winsome witness, he can rejoice that the truth had been received. Thanks be to God. Amen.