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7/8/18--University Presbyterian Church  
Mark 6:1-13

## EXPECT FAILURE

Jesus seems like a pretty nice guy to us. He preached about love. He was kind and compassionate. He forgave. He was good to women and children. What's not to like about a guy like that? And yet, a lot of people didn't like Jesus. There were a lot of reasons why Jesus was not an especially popular guy with many in his community. Some people took issue with the company Jesus kept--how he hung out with all the wrong kinds of people, even eating with tax collectors and sinners. There was the issue that Jesus healed people on the Sabbath and that his disciples didn't always keep the Sabbath rules either. This upset some people. Some people thought that because Jesus could drive out demons from people that he himself was the embodiment of Beelzebul, the biggest demon of them all. Do you recall that Jesus forgave sins? Forgiveness is considered a positive feature when it is offered to us personally, but it isn't always considered a popular attribute when it is extended to other people--people we dislike, people we disapprove of. And besides that, what gave Jesus the authority to forgive others? Some people didn't like Jesus' penchant for forgiving the wrong kinds of people from all the bad things they did and his uppity assumptions that he had the authority to forgive.

Jesus had already encountered a lot of resistance and hostility from many in his community. But even Jesus seemed surprised by the rejection he experienced in his home town. The hometown crowd was amazed by Jesus' teaching. And it wasn't a positive kind of amazement, the kind where the community is proud of the home town kid who has matured into an impressive man. No, this kind of amazement was clearly negative. The friends, and family, and neighbors who heard Jesus teaching in the synagogue questioned Jesus' authority and his

origins. Who does this guy think he is? Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary? Implied in these questions about Jesus' origins is a direct insult to Jesus' character. You see, the hometown crowd knew a lot about Jesus. And the fact that they mentioned only his mother but noticeably failed to mention any father indicates they were hinting at his illegitimate status. In other words, they wanted to know how this bastard boy had the gumption to be preaching and teaching to them! And they are offended by Jesus.

I can't help but wonder if the reason more of us today aren't offended by Jesus is because of the great distance of time. Somehow, all these two thousand years later, Jesus seems more acceptable, less threatening. But if Jesus were to stand among us today, if Jesus were to bring the message of the Kingdom of God to us in our present day context, how might we receive him? If we use the Jesus we find in Mark's gospel as a guide then we might imagine what Jesus might care about and how he might act today. How would we feel if Jesus were to meet and eat and spend time with addicts in drug houses in some of our city's neighborhoods? In this age of polarized politics, would we be so favorably inclined toward Jesus if he stood out in the desert and offered water to the undocumented immigrants passing through those hot and dangerous lands? What would we say if Jesus refused to stand for the national anthem or the pledge of allegiance on the grounds that only God deserves our ultimate allegiance?

Now, to be clear, I do not know for sure that Jesus would do any of these things. But what we do know from scripture is that Jesus did similar scandalous things in his own society. He proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was near, and then he set about showing and teaching what that Kingdom of God looked like. And many people didn't like what they saw. They saw Jesus offering compassion to people they felt were illegitimate. They saw Jesus confronting those in power about their greed and corruption and rocking the boat of the social order. They

saw Jesus forgiving people who deserved society's contempt. They heard Jesus critique the government and its demand for their devotion. They saw Jesus break social and religious rules. And they didn't like it. And they rejected him. And his hometown folks didn't like it or how this illegitimate man with no father in sight was telling them about God. And *they* rejected him. And I can't help but think that if Jesus were to live among us today, well, truthfully, many of us might reject him too.

Jesus was amazed at the strength and fierceness of their rejection. I have to wonder if he was also hurt by it. You and I would sure be and we might want to lash out in anger or revenge. But Jesus simply carries on with his ministry. He cures a few sick people there in his hometown, and then he goes on elsewhere, preaching and teaching and living out the Kingdom of God. And then he sends out the twelve disciples in pairs to undertake the ministry of God's kingdom. But before they leave, he gives them some instructions. He tells them what to pack and how to accept hospitality. But he also tells them this: expect rejection. Expect failure. You won't win everyone over.

Jesus was not the kind of leader to thump his chest and declare himself the best, the greatest, the most successful. Jesus knew that where the Kingdom of God would take him would be in direct contradiction to the world's definition of success. In fact, where the Kingdom of God would take him would be in direct *conflict* with the world's definition of success. What we see in this hometown rejection is the image of the cross beginning to appear on the horizon. Jesus is heading down a road that will embody the world's definition of rejection and failure.

Christianity began as a religion of the rejected. Its origins were small, and its followers were persecuted. But after Emperor Constantine, Christianity found a place of acceptance and even dominance, amassing power, wealth, invading countries, slaughtering people, rejecting

those who did not conform. But that was not its origins. Christianity forgot in its long history of triumphalism and chest thumping and domination of others, that its origins lie in failure and rejection. The cross is the very symbol of failure and rejection. And now the tables have turned again, at least in the western nations of the world. Christianity's dominance is waning. Rejected because of its history of abuse or because it is no longer regarded as relevant, Christianity is experiencing a sizeable decline in popularity and influence. Individual churches such as our own are living in a world that rejects the institution of the church and many of the values that lie at the core of our faith.

Rejection of the Christian message comes not only from outside of Christianity but also from within it. Within some strains of Christianity is the growing popularity that the faith is about achieving worldly success or gain or that the faith is a hallmark of social respectability. There is a rejection of the path Jesus calls us to follow, the path of the Kingdom of God, that is grounded humility, in sacrifice, and in compassion toward the least and most vulnerable in our world. And that path will inevitably include rejection and failure. There is powerful, powerful resistance to the gospel that alters social orders and powers. The forces in our society and world against compassion and love are deeply entrenched and socially, morally, and sometimes legally defended. Jesus confronted men and women with a decision. Are you for or against the Kingdom of God? Those who would walk the way of Jesus, those who would strive to live out Kingdom principles need to expect rejection and failure.

That is what you and I face as we try to follow Jesus. As we try to love with a love that cares about the welfare of others no matter who they are or what their occupation, education, orientation, party affiliation, or documentation, as we try to forgive people even those people who are considered socially acceptable to hate, as we stand up for the oppressed and voice our

solidarity with those in need, we need to expect that not everyone will like us or what we do or say or stand for. We will not win everyone over to the Kingdom of God, even the very people we are trying to love, forgive, or stand up for.

A poem that reportedly hung on Mother Teresa's bedroom wall states this:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.  
 If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.  
 If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.  
 What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.  
 If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.  
 The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.  
 Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.

Did you hear that last line? Give the best you have and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway. Our best will never seem like enough compared to the evil, cruel, greedy, selfish forces at play in the world. The world is awash in hatred and violence. Countries seem to be turning inward. People are rejected from restaurants and bakeries for who they are or what policies they espouse. Desperate people trying to save the lives of their children are treated like criminals. And people regard one another with suspicion. It is true, our best is never enough.

And not only is our best never enough, it is sometimes rejected with scorn and hatred. Thankfully, the success of the Kingdom of God does not rest on your efforts or my efforts. To that we can trust God's power to be sufficient. What you and I are called to do is to just keep living out the Kingdom of God anyway, no matter what, and leave any notion of success up to God. So we pray for courage, courage to love others as Jesus did, courage to stand up for the oppressed, courage to remain faithful to God's ways above all else.

Jesus teaches us, his disciples about the Kingdom of God because he knows it is the only path in life worth living, the only path that offers abundant life. But he also warns us to be realists. Expect rejection. Expect failure. And then, love anyway.