

The Strength to Walk Away from Success

A sermon on Mark 1:29-39, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 & Isaiah 40:21-31

by Nathan Nettleton, 4 February 2018

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Message

Jesus demonstrates the need to reflect on our results and reject the easy success and popularity that are built on meeting basic needs.

Sermon

One of the things that makes it difficult for a church like ours to evaluate its progress, is that the list of things that we're not doing and needs we're not meeting is always much bigger than the list of what we are doing. Even big, well resourced churches can always identify more pressing needs around them than they are ever going to be able to respond to in any meaningful way. When we read words like those we heard from the Apostle Paul earlier: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some", it is easy to start feeling inadequate.

We're not doing much about feeding the hungry or sheltering the homeless. We're not meeting the needs of refugees, or offering much support to the hundreds of people across the road with drug or alcohol problems. Even our worship; it doesn't cater very well to people with hearing impairments, or those who desire to exercise the gift of tongues in the service, or those who like to be in and out in under an hour. If being all things to all people means providing something for everybody, whatever their need, then whichever way you look at it we are not doing well.

But maybe it doesn't mean that at all. And maybe the story of Jesus that we heard in the gospel reading can offer us some help here, because Jesus certainly didn't seem intent on providing everyone with what they were looking for. In fact when everyone started expecting him to do that he walked away and left town. And I reckon that if you want to understand why Jesus was eventually betrayed by one of his closest friends and followers, you can probably trace the issue right back to here in the opening chapter of Mark's gospel where Jesus begins disappointing some of the big ambitions that others had for him.

The story starts promisingly enough. Jesus heal's Simon Peter's sick mother-in-law and she gets up and serves them dinner. It's told in such a matter of fact, unsensational way that its over in a couple of sentences. But the news obviously got around the town in a much more sensational form because in the next verse the whole town is beginning to gather on the doorstep bringing everyone who was sick or tormented looking for healing.

If Jesus is looking for an audience for his preaching he's hit the jackpot. Instant success. They're flocking to his door and they'll hang on every word he says. So he does indeed respond to their needs and we're told that he heals many people of various diseases and frees others from demonic forces.

But what happens the next morning? Well the morning crowd on the doorstep is even bigger than the one of the night before, but Jesus is nowhere to be found. All things to all people? He's being nothing to nobody! His disciples hunt him down and finding him praying in a

quiet place outside of town. “Jesus, you came to proclaim a message and now you’ve got your biggest ever audience waiting to see you. What are you doing out here?”

Jesus doesn’t offer any explanation. He just says, “I think it’s time we moved on to the next town so I can preach there too. That’s what I’ve come to do. Let’s go.” I can hear Judas Iscariot tearing his hair out already. They haven’t even taken up the offering yet!

It would be a bit like if a journalist visited our church and wrote a glowing article about us in the newspaper and the next week a hundred new people turned up. But when it came time for the service, I was absent without leave, and when you finally found me I said “I’ve been praying all night and I think we should close the church immediately, move to Craigieburn, and start all over again.”

You’d be quite sure I’d lost the plot. After all the work we’ve put in rebuilding the church and seeking to become a relevant Christian presence in the local community, you don’t just walk away the moment people begin to catch on and respond. So why then did Jesus do exactly that?

Presumably the answer is to be found in that early morning prayer time that Jesus had in the deserted place, but Mark doesn’t give us any details – just the before and the after. So we’ll never know exactly what went on between Jesus and his God in that time, but a bit of educated guesswork and a good read of the way Mark puts the story together and it seems fairly clear what the issues were.

Just a couple of paragraphs earlier Mark has told us that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by the Satan. Now unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn’t give us any detail of the actual temptations, but what you see instead is the same temptations presenting themselves repeatedly throughout the stories of Jesus’s life.

“Come on Jesus. Do the spectacular thing. Turn stones into bread to feed the hungry. Nothing wrong with that. Heal all the people of their diseases. Nothing wrong with that. Trade on your fame and popularity. Build an instant following by giving them exactly what they want. Be all things to all people. Think of all the good you’ll be able to achieve when you’re famous and sought after. Nothing will be too much for you with influence like that.”

And Jesus turns his back and walks away.

His is not the pathway of success and fame and power. He knows that making the healings the number one thing in his ministry is the short cut to popularity, to building a big following, to church growth and healthy bank accounts.

But he also knows that if he does that he will actually lose any chance of his message being taken seriously. He will become just the dispensary of instant gratification for the needy multitudes and they’ll flock to him to get their piece of whatever they’re looking for and leave to tell others where the free stuff is. And he can preach till he’s blue in the face and they’ll just nod gratefully and leave when they’ve got the goodies they came for.

If he wants success and popularity it would be a great strategy. But if he wants to call people to a life that is absurd by the standards of this world, he’d be wasting his breath.

And maybe when we're feeling that we're not attracting new people the way we'd like to and we see other churches with all sorts of whiz bang programs and ministries drawing the crowds, it's time to head to a deserted place and pray.

Anyone with some basic social research skills can produce a needs profile for the local communities and identify target groups and devise a product to offer. And that's a fine thing to do if you're doing it in response to some prayerful discernment of the pathways into which God is calling you. But sometimes it's just clever product placement and nothing to do with the integrity of the gospel.

Sure a family ministries model might attract us more people with young children. Contemporary "praise and worship" music with a full band is a fairly marketable commodity among the baby boomers. Frontline justice ministries among the disadvantaged can draw a good crowd from the Christian left.

But the reality is that we're not actually going to hear God's call simply by doing an inventory of the needs we're not meeting, any more than Jesus was discerning God's call simply by asking what the crowd at the door wanted.

If we would hear God above the competing cries of the ever present smorgasbord of needs, we will have to seek out a deserted place where we can meet God in the silence and stillness: the silence that unmask us and the stillness that always finds us unprepared. And there we are going to have to let God unclasp us of our pride, unweave our thoughts and unclutter our hearts. For only then will we hear difference between all the cries of "Do this for me, do that for me," and God's whispers in the silence of "Do this, do that." And it is only there in the places of silence and nakedness before God that we are ever going to find the courage and strength to turn our backs and walk away from easy popularity.

It will hurt to turn away and take the path of faithfulness and integrity. But it is only when we take that path that we shall discover the truth of the promise we hear in Isaiah: "Those who wait trustingly for the Lord will find their strength renewed. They will rise up on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary; they will walk and not grow weak."

Jesus waited trustingly on God in a deserted place in the early hours of the morning. And as he waited God showed him another way. Not the way of popularity and success, but the way of suffering that ran all the way to the cross. But Isaiah's promise held true. He rose up with the breath of God's Spirit bearing him up like the wind beneath an eagle's wings.

We declare our faith around this table week after week and share with him in his broken body to remind ourselves that the voice of silence in the deserted places is calling us to the same path, and that if we too take the path of integrity we too will find ourselves raised up with the Spirit beneath our wings.