

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 6:1-13

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This story has a distinctive structure in its indications about the tone of the statements in the story. In many stories the tone is indicated *before* the statement as in, "He was angry and said..." In this case the statements about the tone *follow* what it is that is being said. In the synagogue story the offense and the tone of offense is only stated *after* statements by people in the synagogue.

There are in fact two indications about the tone. The first is that the people were astounded. The second is that they took offense. What the story indicates is that astonishment was expressed as offense and in a tone of offense. So when you tell the story it is important to express the words of the people in the synagogue with the tone of offense as well as astonishment. Likewise, Jesus' statement, "a prophet is not without honor" is said with a tone of amazement. That amazement is given as a clue about his feelings at the end of the story: "He was amazed at their unbelief."

This story is a story of prophetic rejection. It is the first story in the Gospel that is located in Jesus' hometown. The expectation is that he will be greeted with great enthusiasm. Their offense is a reversal of expectations. Jesus' response is an explanation of the fate of many prophets. There is no honor for a prophet in his hometown among his own people. One of the notes of humor in this story is that Mark says he could do no deed of power except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. For anyone else this would be seen as significant "deeds of power" but for Jesus it is a relatively insignificant response and effect.

The second part of the story is about Jesus equipping the twelve for their mission. This is Jesus in his teaching role, leading his traveling seminary of twelve students. Their being sent out two-by-two is a kind of fieldwork experience. This is basic training. What Jesus teaches his disciples is to be radically dependent on other people. He teaches them to operate as itinerant prophets. They take nothing except a staff, sandals, and one tunic. Everything else they are to receive from those who would support them.

The two injunctions as to how the disciples are to act are relatively clear. First, they are told to stay in one place and not to move around to different houses in the village. This means that the disciples in their mission work didn't get to move around and receive goodies from several different houses. Instead they were to stay in one place and live more humbly.

The second injunction is for the benefit of the disciples' morale. It is a teaching about how to deal with rejection. Jesus gives them specific instructions about what to do when they are rejected. They are not to go off and pray. They are not to go off and nurse their wounds or talk with each other about how hard this is or how terrible these people are.

Rather, they are to shake off the dust on their feet as a testimony against these people. Jesus gives them a positive, strong thing to do in response to rejection. What this does is to prevent the disciples from being defeated or discouraged. Everyone who has done door-to-door canvassing or sales or has traveled around to various places in prophetic ministries experiences rejection. Positive methods of coping with rejection is very important for the empowerment of people engaged in prophetic ministry.

The summary of what the disciples then do is essentially parallel to the reports of what Jesus does. They proclaim that all should repent—that they should turn their minds around and focus on the coming kingdom of God. As a sign of the kingdom's presence, they cast out demons and anoint with oil many who were sick and heal them. These are the same actions that Jesus did.

Thus, this story is dealing with the reality of rejection as a dimension of prophetic ministry. It is also a story about the signs of the extension of the message regarding the kingdom of God. It does not receive universal acclamation and affirmation. Rather, it is a message to which some respond positively and others do not. That simply is the nature of the announcement of the coming of the kingdom of God.