

Crocus-Minded

Immediately on the heels of telling the little girl to get up and have something to eat, just after healing the woman who has been bleeding non-stop for more than a decade, Jesus goes home. It is hard to know what he expects in going home, but he is probably not counting on a hero's welcome. Just a few chapters before this one, Jesus' own family seeks him out, wanting to rein him in, believing he has lost touch with reality and that he is not well. So when he shows up this time, I do not believe he is expecting his mother to kiss his cheek and run home to make his favorite meal. And yet, this is still his home, and if the kingdom has indeed come near in him, who can blame him for wanting those he has known all his life to be a part of that kingdom, too.

But they want no part of him, no part of what he brings, it seems. The text I read says they are "repulsed" by him. Other translations tell us the hometown crowd takes offense at him. My colleague and friend Meg Peery McLaughlin tells us:

When they take 'offense,' they really are *skandelidzo*—scandalized by him. Literally 'they stumble' over his teaching; he trips them up.¹

Remarkably, their stumbling trips Jesus up a bit as well. Yes, their unwillingness to hear the Good News he proclaims and the challenge he offers seem to block *them* from receiving the miraculous healing he comes to bring. But as I sat with the text this week, I began to wonder about Jesus' reaction to *their* rejection. Could it be that their unbelief flusters him? Yes, the text says he is appalled, but the word is more traditionally translated as "marvel" or "wonder." Jesus is stunned by their jaw-dropping response to all that they reject in him. Even the Son of God has head-shaking moments of exasperation in response to those who simply refuse to hear the Good News. And I get it. I really do. The Good News is not a Hallmark movie; it is not a cozy warm blanket. The Good News disrupts and scandalizes and trips up our regularly scheduled lives. Can we really blame his back home buddies for wanting him to take his intrusive self elsewhere?

And whether Jesus anticipates this hometown cold shoulder or not, he uses it as a teaching moment of sorts as he sends out the disciples. Even when I am just driving only three miles to the office, I bring a purse, a satchel,

¹ Meg Peery McLaughlin in her paper for the Well in 2015.

and my computer. I carry Chapstick, Kleenex, safety pins, two calendars, nail clippers, hand sanitizer, hand lotion, and a small rock from a conference that is supposed to serve as a reminder of what I learned and experienced there, just to name a few. I try to be prepared for every single contingency lest I get caught somewhere without something I urgently need, lest I find myself in the embarrassing situation of having to ask someone to help me out. But Jesus sends the disciples out with almost nothing. He gives them instructions not to take much in their carry-ons, not even the TSA-approved quart-size Ziploc of toiletries. They are not sent out to be independent lone rangers. Instead they are entirely dependent both on God to provide as well as on the hospitality of strangers. Yes, Jesus is giving them power and authority to call people to repentance, to heal the sick, and to cast out demons, but they are still beholden to those they meet along the way.

And, in case there is any doubt, they will not always be welcomed with open arms. Jesus is unwelcome in his own hometown. Chances are that the disciples will scandalize and trip up complete strangers, too. And Jesus tells them—in the immortal words of Taylor Swift—to shake it off, to shake the dust from their lone pair of sandals and move on. But he also encourages them to take a buddy along. Again, they are not sent out on a solo mission. That’s the most explicit piece of information he gives them: “Go in pairs.” He does not tell them they will always agree or be entirely perfectly compatible or that their pairing will in any way be a love match. He tells them to pair off and go.

And then, without much segue, Mark tells us the sordid story of John’s death. It’s easy to be sidetracked by the soap opera that plays out in Herod’s dining room. We wouldn’t be the first ones to take that bait. Artists throughout the centuries have been captivated by the dance and the dancing girl. I even found myself being taken in by Herod’s being captivated by John. But I don’t think any of that is Mark’s point. As odd as it is to have this flashback spring up on the heels of Jesus’ sending of the disciples two-by-two, I think Mark wants us to see the larger picture. The world into which the disciples are being sent is not a flat story board. This is dangerous work, to say the least. While John’s words make Herod uncomfortable, it is word of the disciples’ healing and teaching that makes him shudder. John haunts Herod, as does John’s call to do the right thing. Something about John’s prophetic speech tied to the force of Jesus’ healing ways threatens Herod to his very core. He is scandalized, too. The Good News trips him up as well. And he does not like it. So he gives in to the whims of a child and her mother and orders that the prophet be killed, hoping perhaps that the prophet’s words will die with him. When Jesus and the disciples

start stirring things up with their disruptive healing and repentance-urging ways, Herod is terrified. And frightened despots are not a good thing.

It's funny though. I am so inclined to cast myself in the role of the disciples here, heading out with my trusty partner to share the Goon News and shake off dust off in the name of Jesus. Maybe when I am feeling bold and—truth be told—a bit self-righteous, I liken myself to John and his unwavering determination to speak truth to power. It is even tempting to see myself in Jesus, whose scandalous words and actions threaten the ones he knows and loves best. Who hasn't felt a little off when going home again, after all? But if I am honest, I am probably not a lead in this drama. Most days, I am more likely to be a cautious skeptic sitting in the synagogue when Jesus blows in. Honestly, I am more inclined to resist his upside-down ways than to embrace them and him. I fear I may also play the role of door closer #3, who closes the door on the disciples when they come knocking. I think I do not want or need what they are selling, you see. I do not really want to repent. I do not want to change my ways. I think I am pretty much good enough most of the time. I mean well after all. I keep my head down and do my work. I stay in my lane and mind my p's and q's. Or to put it in other terms, I am not a crocus. I love crocuses. They give me hope and joy when they poke through the winter ground, but I had never really considered what it takes to be one, until my friend Meg shared a prayer with me that helped me see crocuses in a different light:

It takes courage
to be crocus-minded.
Lord, I'd rather wait until June,
like wise roses,
when the hazards of winter are safely behind,
and I'm expected,
and everything's ready for roses.
But crocuses?
Highly irregular,
Knifing up through hard-frozen ground and snow,
sticking their necks out,
because they believe in spring
and have something personal
and emphatic to say about it.
Lord, I am by nature rose-minded,
Even when I have studied the situation here
and know there are wrongs that need righting,
affirmations that need stating,
and know also that my speaking out may offend –

for it rocks the boat –
well I'd rather wait until June.
Maybe later things will work themselves out,
and we won't have to make an issue of it.
Lord, forgive,
Wrongs don't work themselves out.
Injustices and inequities and hurt don't
just dissolve.
Somebody has to stick her neck out,
somebody who cares enough
to think through
and work through hard ground,
because she believes
and has something personal
and emphatic to say about it.
Me, Lord? Crocus-minded?
Could it be that there are things that need
to be said, and you want me to say them?
I pray for courage. Amen.²

² <https://covnetpres.org/2015/03/a-prayer-for-courage/> as cited by Meg Peery McLaughlin in her paper for the Well in 2015.

Maybe I'd prefer to be a rose, but I'm fairly certain that God needs me to be a crocus, or at least crocus-minded. I think that may be God's call to the church as well. Jesus does not wait for the temperature to be just right or the soil of people's hearts to be just so. He insists that the time is now. He comes and tells the people what they need to hear—even if it isn't what they want to hear. He asks the same of his disciples, too. He does not ask them if they are ready. He tells them they are and sends them, never pretending that the life of faith will be a bed of roses. And whether I am comfortable with it or not, I am not called to be a bystander or an extra or to hide behind the safety of my front door. I am called to go and tell and love and heal and call the world to change her ways and her heart. And that world will not necessarily be thrilled to see me or throw open doors or arms to welcome what I bring in Jesus' name. They did not welcome him either, though. Or I should say the ones who are enamored with power, division, deceit, derision, and dismissing the least and the lost did not then and do not now, no matter what poor semblance of faith they pretend to profess. And yet, they are not the only ones in the room or on the stage. I may not be Jesus or John or even one of the twelve. But I may not be simply a synagogue sitter or door closer #3 either. No, when the dust settles, I realize that I am the one who has felt the hand on my head telling me to walk. I am the little girl who has been given new life in the face of death. I am the woman who has felt Jesus' power heal me from all that the world could not save or solve. I have been healed and saved by none other than Jesus the Christ. As have you. In him and through him, we are given the power and the call to be courageously crocus-minded, to push through the dirt and the dismay to offer hope and joy and truth and love when everything around us insists that an endless gray winter is all there is.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.