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“Ineffective Mission”

Ezekiel 2:1-5

Mark 6:1-13

Mark picks a heck of a story to launch the apostles out on their new mission, doesn't he? Here it is, the first time Jesus is sending the apostles out on their own, two by two – don't take anything with you but the shirt on your back – oh and by the way, if you go back to your hometown, they'll probably kick you out of the synagogue and won't even listen to what you have to say. Good luck!

It's a wonder the Good News got this far, isn't it?

And yet, that's how God has been speaking to humanity all the way back to Moses' time – a long string of ordinary people one after the other, some better preachers and some mediocre at best, each with their own human failings and idiosyncrasies right along with their gifts. Ezekiel has trouble even finding the strength to stand on his feet without the Spirit of God in him.

And the results have been mixed, as you might expect! God sent out prophets, and some people heard the good news and changed their lives, and just as many walked right past and wouldn't give God's messengers the time of day. Or, more realistically, some people tried to change their lives and mostly succeeded (except where they didn't), and the others nodded their heads and maybe smiled politely, then went on doing just what they did before.

God speaks through humanity even knowing how risky and ineffective that is. “Whether they hear or refuse to hear,” says God to Ezekiel as he is called into the mission of God to the people of Israel, and somehow even while God grants that a message might not be well-received in that way, God sends words through people anyway. If even the purest of God's words through Jesus won't be heard by people who can't see past what they think they know about him as the son of a carpenter, the son of Mary, why on earth would God ever think that sending words through people is a good way to get a message across?

And maybe that's the important distinction – a good way or an effective way. God in all the holy omnipotence certainly could do things effectively if God so chose. God could control what messages we hear (like the mandatory TV viewing of the world of the Hunger Games), God could write God's ways on our brains, God could force us to believe or to behave.

And yet God doesn't. God chooses to speak through broken vessels to stubborn, impudent people, knowing full well how little good that might do. Somehow this is the way God believes is the right way, the better way.

And that says a lot about God's character, doesn't it? Speaking through people is about invitation rather than imposition; relationship rather than decree. Our God is not one who rules by force, or would even consider it. Our God speaks truth through regular humans like Ezekiel and the apostles, and then appears

on Earth through a human person, who for all his eloquence and power still looks to some people like “that kid Joshua from down the street – you know, Simon’s brother.”

Now when *we* think about evangelism, we want effectiveness, right? We want people to hear and believe now because we have empty pews and bills to pay!

But God is in the unique position of having the ultimate long view – God knows very well who we humans are, and God knows we require patience. God also knows enough not to take it personally when we fail or dig in our heels or walk right by God’s prophet on the street corner because that homeless trans kid or that woman protesting silently with a Black Lives Matter sign doesn’t look like where we expect God’s word to show up. God knows that says more about our own prejudice than it says about the goodness of God’s message.

In fact, God’s message often goes unheard, it seems, *because* of the ones God chooses to speak it. I wonder if the folks in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth had trouble hearing what he was saying because he wasn’t what they were expecting? How could an ordinary carpenter’s son *heal* us of anything? Who let this guy teach in the synagogue?

And maybe today that happens in a less conscious way. There are some people we *expect* to hear truth from, and so we believe them when they speak; maybe we even give them the benefit of the doubt when they say something hateful or just wrong. And there are others we’ve been taught not to trust. Who we expect to hear speaking in exaggerations or manipulations or outright lies, without even realizing it.

Usually that falls along the lines of gender and race, which makes it doubly and triply hard for us to talk about the ways we treat one another, because so many of us just don’t believe it when someone talks about facing bias or hatred. We’re starting off those conversations not believing that the world could be different than the way we ourselves perceive it, and then we assume that our conversation partners must be exaggerating or maybe trying to get something out of us, and we hear nothing.

And then there is nothing left for them but to walk on, and shake the dust off their feet as they go.

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God speaks through all sorts of people, and we can be glad of that because it means someone in our midsts, someone around us might be speaking God’s truth to us; just as we ourselves might be led to take up God’s call and speak some good news. It is not an easy or a glamorous call – that’s pretty clear. It’s not even always a very effective call. People will hear, and people will not hear, and we will stay or we will walk on.

But if we want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus’ sent-out ones, then we *are* called like them to speak God’s word in our actions and our speech as best we can to the people around us. And if they hear it then we stay with them and practice the sacrament of gathering around a table together, and if they can’t or won’t or just don’t hear it then we move on, knowing that we tried and that God’s word will go on being God’s word with or without the crowds to hear it.

God's word, in fact, is present simply in this action of going into the world depending on the hospitality of others. When the first apostles took no food or money with them, if they wanted to live they had to go find someone who would listen and then accept what they had to offer. Can you imagine how much humility that takes?

We like to think of ourselves as a hospitable congregation, and I think we are, as long as we're talking about offering hospitality to others. But it's a whole different thing for us to depend on the hospitality of people we don't even know yet.

The call of God requires a fairly radical shift in how we approach the world, and how we approach people, especially those we don't know well. We know God speaks through ordinary humans, especially people we wouldn't expect. We know that God's word is proclaimed when we sit with one another at this table and at other tables; when this food is not simply a liturgical snack on the first Sunday of the month but is the bread of life which sustains us.

When we can go out into the world knowing that we need one another *to live*, then we know God's work is being done.

It is hard work; it is scary work; and it is the only work that matters.