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Proper 9B
Peace, Seattle
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Mark 6:1-13

THE WAY OF VULNERABILITY

His name was Jesús—Jesús Jose Maria López—and everyone expected him to go to El Norte ("the North") to save them.[1] But El Norte was a mixed bag, filled with contradictions. Promises and nightmares commingled in the minds of those who dreamed of going there.

The situation in his village was hopeless; people had to leave to escape the sheer brutality and poverty—not because they hoped for riches. In fact, the most radical hope they had was to gain a small foothold in the North and to work quietly, sending a few dollars back home.

Jesús was one among many going North to save their poor village, whose hope was not only about supporting their family but giving them a path out.

Pride and honor were also at stake in their decision. In a community destitute of everything, anything that could lift them up would be life changing. The expectations of his hometown varied. Some would expect miracles, while others would expect next to nothing, knowing that just the thought of trying for a new life was already an act of unspeakable bravery.

They all knew that along the way there were coyótes (smugglers), la migra (border patrol), and other dangers too horrible to contemplate. Hatred lurked everywhere; evil eyes and brutal hands were poised to grab a piece of the desperate migrant all along the perilous way.

Against all odds, Jesús managed to cross the desert, slip through the border, find a job, and begin to send money home. Until he was caught.

In jail, he wrote to his mother telling her the whole situation and asking her to forgive him. He also asked her what the villagers were saying about him.

At first, she said, people were asking, "Where did he get all this money he sends home? It's like a miracle." But then, for some, doubts crept in, "Maybe he's a thief—or a con-man."

When the village found out he'd been detained, their tune changed completely:

> "We knew it! He's no good for this village. He thought he was above everybody else—but he got caught by ICE. Stupido! He hasn't the skills to survive as an immigrant."

Reading the letter from his mother, Jesús was caught off guard, and he was devastated. He'd thought his people would be proud of him for having tried, for having managed to cross the border and send some money home. He thought that the fact that he was caught would evoke their sympathy for him—that they would cover him with prayers. But none of that happened.

For the most part he had no honor in his own village anymore. Now that he's home, even his brothers mock him. But what can he do? Only his mother's love was secure. Everyone else abandoned him and he realized that there was a thin line between honor and shame, and that this line could easily be flipped. Allegiances and betrayals are fickle things.

[1]This story is based on a piece written by Cláudio Carvalhaes for WorkingPreacher.org, in which he reads this text from the perspective of an immigrant, pairing the events of the gospel reading with events of our time. His original commentary can be found at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3729

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Today's gospel is a two-act play. In the first act, Jesus returns for the third time to his hometown.

On his first trip home after his public ministry began the crowds around Jesus were huge as he restored the life of a paralyzed man who had been let down through the roof on his cot. [Mk 2:1f]

On his second trip home the crowds were still wall-to-wall, but rumors had been circulating—and had his family convinced—that Jesus wasn't altogether together up here (in head).

At one point, Mark tells us, Jesus' family members had tracked him down and were intent on taking him home with them, in what comes off like a kind of 1st century family "intervention."

Jesus used the occasion to offer a radically altered definition of "family."

> WHO ARE MY MOTHER AND MY BROTHERS? he asked.
> And looking at those who around him, he said, HERE ARE MY MOTHER AND MY BROTHERS!
> WHOEVER DOES THE WILL OF GOD IS MY BROTHER AND SISTER AND MOTHER. [Mk 3:19bf]

By the time he makes his third trip home, which is what Mark captures in today's gospel, reservations about Jesus have turned the corner and are headed toward outright rejection. Like the migrant, Jesús, Jesus is learning how fickle the allegiance of hometown folk can be.

The content of his message, his popularity, and the company he keeps have begun to rankle.

Eugene Peterson's translation in The Message captures it well. It reads:

> [Jesus] made a real hit, impressing everyone. "We had no idea he was this good!" they said. "How did he get so wise all of a sudden, get such ability?" But in the next breath they were cutting him down: "He's just a carpenter — Mary's boy. We've known him since he was a kid. We know his brothers…and his sisters. Who does he think he is?" They tripped over what little they knew about him and fell, sprawling. And they never got any further. Jesus told them, "A prophet has little honor in his hometown, among his relatives, on the streets he played in as a child."
>
> Jesus wasn't able to do much of anything there – he laid hands on a few sick people and healed them, that's all.[2]

What's the point of this first ACT? Two things.

First, God's approach to us in Jesus can feel too close for comfort. When the penetrating light of God-Incarnate comes to our neighborhood, exposing to the day what we'd rather be kept in the dark, it's easier to write off the messenger than it is to look honestly and clearly into the mirror he's holding up.

Second—and this is the link to ACT TWO—there's a certain vulnerability that comes with following Jesus. The Way to which he calls us is marked by risk and exposure, and by a trust in God so complete that it feels like working without a net.

So Jesus experiences his own very personal rejection and on the heels of this, he sends his apprentices out on their first public mission. **Why?**

Perhaps he wants them to know that rejection and failure simply come with the territory of this journey on which he's invited them; that the only way they can understand this is by experiencing it themselves.

[2] Eugene Peterson, *The Message: New Testament*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993.) p. 100.

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So today, he sends them on a journey, two by two. How does he prepare them?
Notice his instructions:

Take nothing for the journey except a hiking stick, he says.
No food, no luggage, no extra clothing, no VISA card, no smart phone.

The goal is to learn what it means to trust God completely with their lives, and they can only reach it by relying on the very people whom they are sent to serve.

He doesn't say ONLY STAY WITH KOSHER JEWS, or ONLY STAY WITH THOSE WHO SHARE YOUR ETHNIC HERITAGE or RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION or POLITICAL LEANINGS.
In fact, it's not really the WHO that matters but simply WHETHER they practice hospitality.

IF YOU'RE WELCOMED IN A TOWN, he says, STAY.
IF YOU'RE NOT, simply SHAKE THE DUST OFF YOUR FEET AND GO.

The point seems to be that you're at the mercy of those who provide for you… and that's exactly where God wants you to be.

The church that has grown up on American soil has come to so identify Jesus' mission with success and with strength that it's hard for us to imagine placing ourselves in the vulnerable position Jesus puts the apostles in.

American culture is all about upward mobility. And especially these days the upward mobility being championed begins with sticking to your tribe and stoking fear and suspicion of those who are different, who are "other."

Nowhere is this more true than among America's white evangelical protestants, among whom the politics of fear and resentment, coupled with anxieties about race, have played particularly well.

The question that must be asked—and asked by all who claim Jesus as Lord—is:

"Do both the method and message of our political engagement point to something about the witness of Jesus in the world, or have they begun to obscure it?"[3]

"Jesus' own public witness," writes David Heim, "was never based on fear or resentment, nor was it designed to retain or retrieve earthly power for himself and his companions. He identified instead with the outcast and neglected, and pointed toward the creation of a society that includes everyone."[4]

The journey to which Christ calls us is one of vulnerability and risk, of hospitality, of both welcoming the stranger—and being the stranger—that Christ himself was.

The church we're called to be is a community of servants who know that it's when we leave this place that our real work begins. A community that understands nobody is perfect, that God's grace is sufficient, and that divine power is made perfect in our weakness. A community that keeps coming week after week expecting God to show up—and low & behold God does!

Sisters and Brothers, we have a journey ahead of us, and this is the Table where we come to be fed, to take in Christ so we can be Christ for the world. So come, get some food, take it in, let it nourish you. And then, let's be on our way. Amen.

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[3] *Christian Century*, July 4, 2018.
[4] Ibid, page 7.