

Shaking Off the Dust

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July 4, 2021. On this Independence Day, as we celebrate the birth of this particular nation, Jesus models for us the truth that our identity and call as children of God always comes over and above the labels placed on us, even and perhaps especially the labels of nation and country.

Readings: [Ezekiel 2:1-5](#), [2 Corinthians 12:2-10](#), [Mark 6:1-13](#)

*** Transcript ***

Recently I pulled out my yearbook from my senior year in high school and looked at the “Senior Poll” section. Remember that? “First married.” “Last married.” “Most respectful.” “Biggest flirt.” “Talkative.” “Biggest mess.” “Most likely to succeed.” And then there was my name, next to “most serious.” I hadn’t remembered that my classmates saw me that way, and in many ways it’s hard to imagine now. But looking back at how seriously I took things most of the time, it makes sense.

My youngest brother, in contrast, wore his humor and lightness on the outside, and I realized somewhere along the way that that often made it hard to take him seriously — we so often expected a joke or a laugh from him, that I think his more earnest side was missed a lot of the time. These perceptions, or labels, or expectations can come out of how we show up in the world, and they can also come to define or constrict us as well. We become “the serious one.” We become “the funny one.”

On this Independence Day, I’m reminded of Abraham Lincoln, one of our most well-known and respected presidents, who was for years seen as a failure. He lived with sometimes debilitating mental illness, and lost far more elections than he won on his way to becoming President of the United States. Albert Einstein, brilliant scientist famous for defining the theory of relativity, was a horrible student in his younger days, and in fact there was actually concern that he might have a learning disability that prevented him from learning in academic settings.

The labels placed on them may have had some basis in truth — Lincoln did experience many failures, and Einstein did struggle in school — but ultimately, the labels placed on them did not fit the fullness of who they would become.

Jesus, in today’s gospel, faces the reality of the labels attached to him by those who have known him longest and best. Hearing the powerful wisdom of his teaching and seeing the miracles he is capable of (Jesus, after all, has just returned from healing Jairus’s daughter and the woman with hemorrhaging), they can’t reconcile what they know of Jesus, their neighbor, with what they are seeing now. “This is Joseph and Mary’s son,” his family and neighbors say. “We know him, and his siblings.” They insist that he is the carpenter’s son, nothing more, nothing less. Who does he think he is, trying to be anything different?

Defying all of their expectations, Jesus unapologetically claims his identity and call as the Son of God. Who he is as the son of a carpenter and a Nazarene comes after that, and this disturbs his family and neighbors, who expect him to claim his place in Nazareth first, above all else. They want him to be the carpenter’s son. As theologian Debie Thomas writes in her blog this week, Jesus refuses to stay in his lane, and persists in sharing the truth of God that he has come to proclaim. Mark tells us that his friends and neighbors, blinded by their perceptions and expectations of who Jesus is, are unable to see the amazing things he embodies about the love and mercy of God.

This is such a human thing we do, isn't it? We as humans have an unfortunate habit of placing our expectations and limits, on ourselves and on one another, and that can blind us to the truth of who God has created us to be. We all have expectations, conscious or not, of others, based on what we know about them — immigration situation, level of education, religion, socio-economic status, or even, assuming they are from St. Louis, what high school they went to. It's more comfortable, isn't it, when we know what to expect. Jesus refused to stay in the lane created for him and claimed his identity in God, much to the chagrin of those around him who knew exactly what to do with Jesus, Joseph and Mary's son, but had no idea what to do with Jesus, Son of God.

Jesus refused to stay in his lane, even knowing that there would be those who would reject him because of that. And he prepares his disciples for that reality, telling them that as they go out to carry the gospel that God has given them to embody in the world, there will be those who will refuse to hear the good news they have to share. Jesus advises his disciples to shake the dust off their feet, the dust of rejection, and claim the truth of God's call and promise that remains even when others can't see it. God shares the same wisdom with Ezekiel, saying that when he brings the word of God to the people of Israel there will be those who will refuse to hear, but that rejection will not make Ezekiel any less a prophet.

Being our imperfect, vulnerable, unique selves does not stop us being a prophet either. Paul reminds the Corinthians of this as he shares about the "thorn in his side" that he can't get rid of, no matter how hard he tries. We don't know what the thorn is, but Paul does make it clear that being God's beloved is not about being perfect, but about God's claiming us and showing us who we are. When we see ourselves and those around us as God sees us — children of God — God frees us from the mistakes that we make and tells us that being human does not equal worthlessness. God frees us from those labels and expectations, and we can experience the surprising and amazing things that God is doing in and around us.

That "most likely to succeed" or "fail," that "most serious" label in the high school yearbook, doesn't have the power to predict what use God will make of us and our lives. Just as our identities as children, parents, siblings, friends, abled or disabled, gender, ethnicity, St. Louis native or transplant, married or single, and all of the other identities that we carry are part of who we are, but they can never fully define us. On this Independence Day, as we celebrate the birth of this particular nation, Jesus models for us the truth that our identity and call as children of God always comes over and above the labels placed on us, even and perhaps especially the labels of nation and country.

Shaking off the dust of expectations and rejection allows us, all of us, to live into the fullness of who God calls us to be, and opens our hearts to experience the miracles of God all around us, just when we least expect it. Whatever other labels we carry, we are first and foremost beloved of God.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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