

A Determined Life – Mark 6:1-13

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I was sitting on my back porch one night this week and happened to turn my attention to a bird house I have hanging from one of the trees in the yard. The bird house is sufficiently built, of course, for...birds. It's not sufficient, however, for a squirrel to enter it. However, that didn't stop one determined squirrel from doing its best to make it its new home.

Time after time, it tried to force its way through the hole to the inside; and time after time, it was turned away. In five minute-or-so intervals, it would come back and try again to do the impossible: make its way inside a home it was not built for.

I lost track of that squirrel for a bit. Then, probably 15 minutes later, I saw it again. This time, it was sitting on the branch above the hanging bird house pleasantly chomping on something it had found to eat elsewhere.

There's something admirable about a quest that is determined. When faced with challenges and persistently being denied with the results one seeks, to keep a determined attitude and temperament goes a long way.

Jesus comes across as a determined character here in Mark 6. He returns to his hometown of Nazareth. And once there, his reception is not one of joyful reunion. The hometown folks find that Jesus is not who they remember him as being. He's grown and now carries with him wisdom and knowledge they don't remember him having when he was a boy growing up there.

"Is this not the son of Mary and the brother of James and the others?" they asked incredulously. It was as if they didn't

recognize him. And more than that, they took offense at what he was teaching.

What Jesus said and did was disruptive and uncomfortable, born out of a determination to succeed no matter where he was—especially in his hometown.

We can tell he's disappointed in the reception he finds there and has a bit of an attitude about him here when his presence is met with resistance. He says, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown and among their own kin and in their own house."

We can tell it bothered Jesus not to be welcomed among those in his hometown. He expected a more robust acknowledgement, an affirmation of boy-makes-good. But instead, there was only skepticism. And he was met with such resistance that Mark tells us his deeds of power were restricted to just a few healings.

What was so disruptive about what he was doing, we'll never know. Whether it was his words, his actions, or the change in his perceived identity, we can't tell. But suffice it to say, based on what we know elsewhere in the gospels about Jesus, he was shaking up the religious establishment and the very core of what it meant to be a person of faith.

And even in his hometown, he was determined to carry out his mission.

And then, Jesus, in essence, commissions his disciples to go out and be as determined as well—no matter the barriers that are placed around them. And the key for them would be staying focused on the mission and not get distracted by what they took along on their journeys.

Travel light, he says. Travelling two by two, the disciples were not to take any money, or bag, or bread. Only a staff. And when they went into a place and were not welcomed, they were to shake the dust off their feet as they left. Determined. And resilient.

“Travel light,” he may have said, “because you’re probably going to fall, and you’ll have to quickly pick yourself up and dust yourself off.”

There’s wisdom here in travelling light—both literally and metaphorically. In our discipleship, the physical things that weigh us down often get in the way of our living faithfully. Our reliance on the stuff of the world makes it hard to focus on our jobs as disciples. And, when we get knocked down in our quests to be faithful, our reliance on our material things keeps us from getting up quickly and going again.

Our baggage, though, is more than just physical. We are weighted down by the guilt, the anger, the resentment, and the sorrow we keep close and have kept close to us for a long time. And then when we get knocked down on our journeys, it’s no wonder we have a hard time getting up and starting again.

All of us have many worries of the world. Whether it’s the concerns we harbor for ourselves or our family members, or whether it’s the concerns we harbor for the country, culture, or the world, we have a difficult time leaving our worries at the side of the road. But a life of joy and peace as God’s children, a life of adventure sharing the gospel through our actions, can only come when we travel light. When we leave our worries on the side of the road—at least for a while—we are more apt to make it back up after we’ve gotten knocked down.

Jesus calls us to travel light, to lay down those things that would impede our progress, for after all, Christ has promised to carry our load.

Dr. Daniel E. Fountain, a medical missionary in Africa recounts the following story: One day the chauffeur of our hospital pick-up truck in Africa was driving to one of our health centers. He noticed an elderly lady struggling along the road carrying a very heavy load of firewood on her head. The chauffeur stopped and offered to take the lady and her firewood to her village. He helped her into the back of the truck and then proceeded on his way. However, when he glanced in the rear-view mirror he was astonished to see this lady sitting in the back of the truck with the load of firewood back on top of her head!

How often do we fail to accept the promise of the Lord to carry our burdens?

Andre Gide, a twentieth century French writer, wrote in 1919 a short meditation on Christianity entitled "The Pastoral Symphony," which was later adapted into a three-act play and motion picture. It revolves around the relational dynamic between a beautiful young woman named Gertrude, blind from birth, and a devout Swiss minister, who rescues her from a hovel and guides her from darkness into light. And yet the light is blinding, more blinding than her blindness.

When surgery suddenly enables her to see, two things awakened her soul with crushing pain. One is that "my eyes opened on a world more beautiful than I had ever dreamt it could be;...the daylight so bright, the air so brilliant, the sky so vast." The other thing that struck her powerfully, and that precipitated her death, was the way people's faces were "so full of concern,"

pain and emptiness. She almost wished that her eyes had never been opened by the miracle.

Our pain and our emptiness weigh us down. Christ invites us to travel light by casting off our burdens and placing them on him.

A young, aspiring baseball pitcher knew he was in trouble one day when his Little League coach approached the mound and said: "Son, I think I better have someone relieve you."

"But," the pitcher argued, "I struck this guy out last time."

"I know," said the coach. "But this is the same inning."

Joy often happens and burdens are lifted when we get a little help, a little relief. A determined life comes when we're willing to cast off the burdens that would weigh on us.

Jesus offers and brings us that relief. He invites us to put down those things that would keep us from moving forward and disrupting the world with our joy and the peace of new life.

Some of you may be familiar with the old gospel song titled, "I wouldn't take nothing for my journey now" written by Charles Goodman and Jimmie Davis.

*Well, I wouldn't take nothin' for my journey now
Gotta make it to heaven somehow
Though the devil tempt me and he tried to turn me around*

*He's offered everything that's got a name
All the wealth I want and worldly fame
If I could still I wouldn't take nothin' for my journey now*

*Oh, there's nothin' in this world that'll ever take the place of
God's love*

*All the silver and gold wouldn't buy a touch from above
When the soul needs healin' and I begin to feelin' his power
Then I can say, thank the Lord, I wouldn't take nothing for my
journey now.*

Travelling without the encumbrances—either material or spiritual—that weigh us down comes with a determined life and a determined faith. It's having the attitude that Jesus seemed to have here—as he received the cold shoulder from his hometown. It's having the attitude that Jesus implored his disciples to embrace—travelling lightly and, when getting knocked down, dusting yourself off and moving forward.

Keep going! No matter the looks you get, the comments that are made, the roadblocks that are erected, or the distractions that are presented, be determined. Christ is ready to bear your burdens.