

God's Mission despite the Scoffing and Rejection

I am sure you have come across stories with similar themes to the two I have selected here.

A driver is stopped by a police officer.

The driver asks: 'What's the problem officer?'

Officer: 'You were going at least 75 in a 55 zone'

Man: 'No sir I was going 65.'

Wife: 'Oh Harry, you were going 80.' (The man gives his wife a dirty look.)

Officer: 'I'm also going to give you a ticket for your broken tail light!'

Wife: 'Oh Harry you've known about that tail light for weeks.' (The man Gives his wife another dirty look)

Officer: 'I'm also going to give you a citation for not wearing your seat belt.'

Man: 'Oh I just took it off when you were walking up to the car.'

Wife: 'Oh Harry, you never wear your seatbelt.'

The man turns to his wife and yells, 'Shut your mouth!' (will you shut up!)

The officer turns to the woman and asks: 'Ma'am, does your husband talk to you this way all the time?' The wife says: 'No, only when he is drunk!'

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I like stories like these, the ones that make fun of different controlling and defining roles in personal or working relationships. I also know, however, that situations occur, all too common in life, where people try to exercise control and play some very devious power games. These situations are not so funny but more hurtful, degrading and painful.

Tony Campolo, in his book, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, refers to the time when he and his wife stopped off in Honolulu for a break on the way home to USA from New Zealand after a preaching mission. They had plans to catch a flight to Los Angeles five hours later. As they strolled along Waikiki Beach they came upon a very strange looking man standing with a Bible in one hand and waving his finger at every passerby with the other. He was barefoot and wearing a dirty T-shirt and tattered trousers. To everyone who passed by he pronounced the judgment of God on those who would not accept Christ. As they passed him, Campolo said to his wife: 'It's guys like that who are an embarrassment to the Kingdom of God. People look at weirdos like that and get turned off to the gospel. Guys like that leave me a bit disgusted.' A while later they were walking back to catch the bus to the airport, when they came upon the same man. To their surprise there were two very normal-looking, properly dressed men standing with him. He had his arms around their shoulders and Campolo noted as he passed, that he could hear them saying a prayer, surrendering their lives to Christ. His wife looked at him and simply asked: 'Well? How many people did you lead to Jesus today?' Campolo wrote that this is an

example of the ‘foolishness of preaching’ highlighted by St Paul, as a way to spread the gospel. I would add that this is about people defining other people, people being limited by others and judged. His wife must have made Campolo, feel embarrassed.

Mark’s Gospel, today is, I believe, about all these things. Jesus was still in the early part of his ministry. He had performed a few miracles, he was becoming known as a preacher and teacher. After Capernaum he was back in Nazareth and the homecoming was not good. “Where did he get all this? What wisdom is this that has been given to him? How does he perform miracles? Isn’t he the carpenter, the son of Mary? Don’t we know his brothers and sisters?” Everyone in Nazareth thought they had Jesus figured out.

Jesus’ ministry had begun quite promisingly. His message was positive and people were interested. This changed when he returned to Nazareth. Until now Jesus’ ministry had been in Capernaum. Back in Nazareth he wasn’t going to change his message to suit the tastes of the crowd. He was going to preach God’s word without qualification. Ups and downs in his popularity were the least of Jesus’ priorities. And through his ministry times were going to be changeable, even turbulent, but his message would be the same.

He taught in both synagogues and the crowds in Capernaum and Nazareth were astonished. But their attitudes were poles apart. In Capernaum, they were captivated by his message: "What is this?" they said, "A new teacher with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." (Mark 1:27). In Nazareth they seemed arrogant and suspicious, not in awe and wonder. They seemed offended. Jesus was JUST a carpenter! The Greek word used here is tekton, an all- embracing word used for craftsmen who build things. On a social scale of 1 – 10, apparently, a tekton would be rated about 3 whereas rabbis would be rated 8. Here was Jesus, the socially rated 3/10 carpenter starting to travel around the country, teaching crowds of thousands and working miracles, convincing people about the Kingdom of God, even that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. You can palpably feel the people’s reaction. You can taste the bitter taste of resentment, the scoffing and rejection. It was an uncomfortable atmosphere.

No one had a clue about Jesus. Mark often points out that even the disciples, who were with him day and night for 3 years, showed they did not know Jesus. How could his family, his friends and residents of Nazareth know him? In their eyes he was nothing more than a simple craftsman. Maybe they thought Jesus’ words as delusional, he was getting above his station in life. Maybe it was jealousy. Whatever, they rejected him. Jesus could have gone back into the woodshop and never come out. But he did not. He knew there was God’s work to do. He knew the disciples would have to learn how to do it. So Jesus faced the suspicion and resentment but, as Mark says, he ‘was not able to perform any miracles there, except that he placed his hands on a few sick people and healed them. He was greatly surprised because the people did not have faith.’ Mark implies that Jesus could have done much more if the people had been more open to his real presence. They were not. The people wanted to put a limit on Jesus and on what he could say and do. There was no way that this carpenter was going to change the structure of their world or anybody else’s!

And so Jesus sends his 'fishers of men' out fishing. No illusions about warm receptions on their travels. It will be arduous, lonely and painful. No illusions about extended stays in welcoming places. No illusions about carrying heavy bags of clothes, food and other supplies. They must travel light. If rejected, Jesus tells them, they must leave quickly, shaking off the dust from their sandals, distancing themselves from the unbelief of the community and from the judgment that will inevitably come. Forearmed with Jesus' message and forewarned of the difficulties they will face, the disciples hit the road. They preached and healed. Jesus, meeting with mixed success and a lot of suspicion himself, commissions his disciples with basic ground rules: support and respect each other, keep the message simple and keep an eye on the goal, travel lightly and live simply and do not get stressed out about what doesn't work. With these principles Jesus delegates authority to this small band of uneducated, sometimes cowardly and insensitive men.

It is all about control. The people wanted to limit God. 'there is no way he is going to do that, isn't he a carpenter? Do we ever put limits on people, on things, even on God? 'There is no way he is going to do that! How can he...? Isn't he just a? God has put no limits on us, no limits on expressing his limitless love.

Tony Campolo in his book, '*Let Me Tell You a Story*' relates the time when he was a counsellor at an American junior-high camp. He realized that boys, at these camps, have a strange, often cruel sense of humour. They pick on unfortunate, off-beat kids and ridicule them. While he was there they picked on Billy, who couldn't walk or talk properly. He sort of dragged himself everywhere and had a stutter. On the day Billy's cabin had been assigned to lead morning devotions they voted Billy to be the speaker, to get him up in front of everybody to entertain them as he struggled to say anything at all. Somehow, Campolo writes, Billy dragged himself up onto the rostrum accompanied by a wave of sniggers from the audience. It took Billy almost a minute to say, 'Je—sus...loves ...me....and....I....love Je—sus.' When he finished there was stunned silence. There were tears streaming down boys' faces, many had their heads bowed. In that week, Campolo notes, nothing had worked to reach the boys with the gospel, until this 13 year-old physically disabled lad displayed his love for Christ and everything changed. Others had been trying to define Billy, limit his expectations, judge him and control him!

Jesus refused to let anyone define who he was or what he should do. Jesus didn't let others judge him either. His Father was in control. And no one was going to hold him back. Jesus was not arrogant or egotistical but he knew what God was calling him to do. What others wanted was not up for discussion. If Jesus had stayed in Nazareth he may never have finished what God called him to do. Jesus told the disciples to do the same. Follow God and if necessary move on.

We should never let others define us, judge us, limit us or hold us back. If what we are doing isn't working then we have to move on. There are times when we may become aware that God's plan is for us to move on and do something else. God doesn't see us in terms of who we are now but in what we can be and can do. So, looking to new situations and new opportunities wherever they occur, let us keep moving on with God.