

July 5, 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Mark 6:1-13

## **As Jesus prepares to send the Twelve, his experience of failure seems to color his instructions.**

by [Cleophus J. LaRue](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue

There is something about failure in great people that we find interesting, possibly even encouraging. It's not a morose desire to see them fail. It's rather the irony of seeing people who are accomplished in so many things fail miserably in others. We often marvel at the inner strength that propels them forward despite their failure. And often we are told of their failings as a way of spurring us ordinary mortals on to greater achievement.

I remember being quite disappointed when Walter Isaacson, in his biography of Albert Einstein, refuted the oft-reported story that the great physicist had failed math class in his early years. This story, told in scores of books and on thousands of websites as a way of reassuring underachieving math students, simply was not true. According to Isaacson, when a rabbi in Princeton told Einstein that the story had appeared in a widely read newspaper column, Einstein chuckled and assured the rabbi that before he turned 15 he had already mastered differential and integral calculus.

With that myth debunked, I could only take comfort in the fact that early in Einstein's career, even after devising a revolutionary quantum theory of light, he was rejected in his efforts to seek university employment and had to settle for a job as a third-class patent examiner. Einstein was not deterred by this early rejection and failure, and many Americans would come to know later of his great successes.

When we compare ourselves to great people, they often seem more like us in their failures than in their successes. So we derive encouragement from their setbacks. Their genius and success may cause us to marvel and to question why the few appear so much more gifted than the many. But their failures, real and imagined,

imbue us with a sense of hope, courage, and even redemption. All is not lost when we fail.

The consistent witness of the New Testament is that Jesus is rejected by his own people. He fails to work successfully among those who supposedly know and love him best. Rejection by anyone evokes powerful emotions, but such rejection is especially painful when it comes at the hands of friends and relatives. Mark reports that Jesus marvels at the unbelief of the people in the town where he was brought up. (John, making note of this same rejection, says that Jesus came to his own, and his own people received him not.) Because of this rejection, says Mark, Jesus can do no deed of power there, except that he lays his hands on a few sick people and cures them.

As Jesus prepares to extend his own ministry through the sending of the Twelve, his experience of failure and rejection seems to color his instructions to his disciples. Along with telling them to cast out demons and heal the sick, he gives them a ritual for failure when their message is not received: "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." Shaking the dust from one's feet was a gesture used by pious Jews as they returned to Israel from a gentile land; it symbolized separation from any clinging form of defilement. This ritual stands as a testimony before God that the townspeople have refused to hear God's word.

But it's not only what this ritual does to the townspeople; it's also what it does for the disciples: it helps them bring closure to a failed initiative and move on from it. The people of God are not to waste their resources fretting over those who will not receive the word. Nor are they to waste their time in self-absorption when things don't go as planned. Just as Jesus acknowledges, with disappointed wonder, his rejection by his own people and then moves on to other villages, so his disciples are admonished not to tarry seeking to persuade those who refuse the message. Move on.

This ritual for failure is no ready and easy excuse for those who want to jump ship at the first sign of difficulty and disagreement. It is rather a symbolic act, to be repeated as often as necessary, that helps us go on with our work in the world in spite of failure and disappointment. It is not a way out but a way forward. It's not how to stop doing something; it's how to continue doing it but under different circumstances and different arrangements. We are not to be stopped by failure and

rejection, but we should find a way to close that chapter and start a new one—more determined than ever to continue on.

There is a wonderful prayer that is often heard in the black church when the people of God are facing extreme difficulty, rejection, and failure. It is a prayer of determination in the face of adversity: “O Lord, in this time of uncertainty, strengthen us where we are weak, build us up where we are torn down, and prop us up on every leaning side.” Days of failure and rejection will come to all of us. In such times we will need a ritual, a symbolic act that signals our determination to run on and see what the end will be.