

July 8, Ordinary 14B (Mark 6:1-13)

The final lesson in Discipleship 101: learning to fall

by [Moffett Churn](#) in the [June 20, 2018](#) issue

My final exam in bowling was broadcast over the college radio station. I needed to pass in order to meet the physical education requirement for graduation. Fortunately the bowling gods were on my side, and I threw my cap to the wind a few days later. The bowling idea came after judo, where I had a harder time. Fascinated by the new wave of kung fu films, I enrolled in the first-level judo class—twice, taking incompletes both times. For the life of me, I couldn't learn to fall.

In Mark 6, Jesus and the disciples arrive in Jesus' hometown. The story, often titled "Rejection in Nazareth," is providently placed just as Jesus prepares to take the training wheels off and send the Twelve out on their first missionary foray apart from him. As much as I enjoy casting the disciples in the role of clueless foils, I can draw a straight line from their fumbling and stumbling to my own. Both as a teacher and as a learner, I'm struck by the way Mark documents this introduction to discipleship class. Rather than seeing the Twelve as clueless dimwits, I see them as freshmen. And there are few things that make me feel more fragile and frightened than being a flat-out beginner.

Mark 1-5 gives an excellent overview of the 101 class as Jesus starts to train the people who've been set apart to replicate his ministry. Jesus' pedagogy includes verbal teaching, eliciting questions, and demonstrating core competencies; his content covers such subjects as "The Buzz about Beelzebul" and "Family Is Relative." Midway through the semester, Jesus introduces the concept of a "master story," meant to contextualize their whole mission going forward. "Listen up!" he says, as he begins unpacking the parable of the soils, "you might want to remember this—it's going to be on the midterm." Following the tutorial on "Start Small, Think Big" (lessons learned from a mustard seed), Jesus herds the Twelve onto a boat so he can teach them to tame their fear of disequilibrium. And then it's off to the tombs for "Ownership Transfer: The Ins and Outs of Exorcism." Finally, when repeated

interruptions force him to alter his teaching plan, Jesus offers an impromptu lesson: “How to Stop Time.”

As they near the end of their introductory training, the disciples are poised to hit the road for some applied learning. But first there is one more requirement: they have to learn to fall. This will not be enjoyable—they may all decide to quit and check out the bowling class—but Jesus knows that being his followers will make them easy targets (Mark 13:13). So, no matter how much teaching they’ve taken in, they have to learn to take a tumble—or they will be broken into Humpty Dumpty bits before they leave the gate.

Jesus has a deep reservoir of resources to draw from for this lesson. The prophets are well stocked with warnings about the wall of resistance that awaits any would-be message bearer (see the Ezekiel reading), and psalms such as the assigned one offer a foretaste of the steady diet of scorn that will be served up to those who serve. But Jesus takes the deep-dive approach, bringing the disciples along to observe his own drumming down at the hands of his hometown community. Perhaps if they see Jesus survive a fall from the heights of the rock star bandwagon, the Twelve will learn to take their lumps and get back in the ring.

The less-than-celebratory reception in Nazareth comes as no surprise to anyone who’s been following the story. Jesus’ place in the pecking order was settled at birth, and the shame and honor police would suffer no foolish attempt to rise up. And efforts by Jesus’ family to nip his budding career amid rumors that he was off his rocker could not have escaped notice in the old neighborhood. Despite his success outside of Nazareth, the hometown crowd is having none of it. Mark doesn’t throw us any hint as to what Jesus teaches in the synagogue. But it probably isn’t anything he says that pinches their nerve. From the moment he sets foot in town, Jesus is dancing over a fault line.

What is surprising is what happens after the unpleasantness in the synagogue. In the wake of being written off as a wannabe by his own people, Jesus forgoes the luxury of licking his wounds. Instead, he dusts himself off and goes back to work—only to fail spectacularly. Matthew, who apparently cannot come to grips with this picture of Jesus falling on his face, reports only that Jesus “did not do many deeds of power there.” But Mark un.masks all our attempts to spare Jesus the embarrassment, telling us straight up that “he could do no deed of power there.” Thanks to the thick culture of disbelief in Nazareth, the power that has always been

on tap for those who believe is now cut to a trickle. And with this stunning one-two punch, the intro class comes to a close.

Will the falling lessons come in handy when the Twelve set out on their own? The aura of success around their return suggests otherwise. But as the road gets harder, all of them—with one notable exception—will pass the final. And though I would much rather stand on my accomplishments, 50 years in the dojo with Jesus has taught me that there is grace to be found in learning to fall.