

“When Dust Dries Our Feet”

Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Ezekiel 2:1-5

Mark 6:1-13

“Don’t shoot the messenger.” This saying-- which is meant as a warning not to blame a messenger who speaks truths you don’t want to hear-- has an eerie ring to it considering the attack on an office of journalists in Annapolis, MD the week before last. The shooter was deranged and had a gripe about how a story about his stalking behavior had been shared by the local newspaper.

Today we hear about journalists, who work tirelessly to uncover and unravel difficult truths about the injustices happening in this country, being slapped with the label of “fake news.” At the same time, stories that are blatantly false and damaging and don’t have a ring of truth in them get tweeted and repeated by people in the top positions of power.

But this challenge of messengers not being believed even by their own communities goes back to Jesus’ time and even before that. God appointed Ezekiel to prophecy to the house of Israel, warning Ezekiel that the Israelites are impudent and stubborn, a rebellious house. Ezekiel’s community do not sound like folks eager to soak up the truths Ezekiel was setting out to share. What the people did with the message Ezekiel spread was on them. “Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”

So, when Jesus’ message gets rejected when he preaches in his own home town, amongst neighbors, many of whom were probably related to him, he could at least take comfort in the fact that he was in the company of

a long line of important prophets whose messages were not accepted by their own communities. Instead of seeing Jesus' ministry as bringing forth the the reign of God, his little hometown of Nazereth clucked their tongues and said, "Oh, that's just Mary's son, the carpenter. Isn't he the one who repaired the roof last year? Now was he the oldest, or was it James or John or Judas-- all those J names, we can't keep them straight. Or was it one of his sisters who was born first? Ha, look at him now, acting so important. He should remember his place before he finds trouble!" No matter that he healed a few sick people in Nazareth and cured them; the folks who had watched him grow up couldn't see beyond their own disbelief.

And so, Jesus knew when he sent out his disciples to spread their testimonies, that there would be some who would not receive them. "Don't let the haters drag you down," Jesus reminded them. Just shake off the dust from your feet and continue your ministry in my name. But he also gave them some instruction that I imagine would have opened the people's ears a little more to what the disciples had to share.

Jesus' instruction to the disciples was to bring nothing with them, except for a staff and a tunic. No bread or money or change of clothes; instead, they were to rely on the hospitality of those they would encounter. You see, Jesus-- the one who was born in a stable because there was no room in the inn; the one who was a refugee from his home into Egypt as a very young boy, when Herod's fear threatened his life-- knew something about the power of hospitality and welcome. A welcome can change the course of things-- not only for the traveler, but also for the host.

The Muslim community in Tampa, Florida must know something about the power of a welcome-- and probably also the sting of rejection-- because they offered last week to house and host 2300 detained migrant children and babies until they can be reunited with their families. They would do this at no cost to the government. Hospitality has a religious level of significance in Islam, but the religions that Islam branched out of--

Christianity and Judaism-- also put a holy value onto hospitality. Hebrews 13:2 instructs us, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. "

This story of the disciples going out with nothing but a staff--no bread, no bag, no money, no second change of clothes-- reminds me of two things: first, I think of the rule for Buddhist monks and nuns, that they only carry with them their robes, and an alms bowl. The alms bowl teaches the devout about non-attachment to material possessions. Instead of relying on one's own stores of food and savings, the Buddhist monk or nun must depend on the kindness of strangers as they donate food or other offerings into the monk's bowl.

The other experience I am reminded of is a visit I took with a small delegation from my former church to visit the three Presbyteries of the Iglesia Presbiteriano de Colombia. This was my second trip as their guest, and those joining me were going for the first time. Like my first trip there, I was told by the Colombian leadership not to bring any gifts. Gifts, I was told, create a relationship based on hierarchy, and place the Colombians with a sense that they need to repay a debt to the gift-givers. Gifts, I was told, get in the way of forming meaningful and equal relationships. Instead, we were told to just bring ourselves and an openness to what the Colombian Presbyterians had to offer and to teach us.

This approach is quite different from how I had traveled on mission trips in the past. I had learned before to bring all old clothes I did not mind leaving behind, so that those I encountered could benefit from my castaway clothes. I had never considered that this practice just might take away the pride of a people.

After visiting Bogota, where Presbyterians were well-educated and relatively well-off, we got to the Uraba Presbytery, which is in the slice of Colombia that borders Panama and has a large number of indigenous and Afro-Colombians, many of whom have been forcibly displaced from the lands they had farmed for generations as the land became more valuable for cash crops such as African Palm. In that region, the Presbyterian church has been hard at work helping church people, most of whom are or were farming peasants, demand their legal rights after their forced and illegal displacement. A related part of the church's work there is to provide spiritual healing and practical steps towards resilience to communities that have experienced trauma. As one pastor explained to me, everyone in his church has a family member who has been evicted from their homes by paramilitaries or drug lords or the government, and many of those have also lost a loved one to violence from these same forces. When we stepped off the tiny airplane in Uraba and felt the hot steamy thickness of the air, the chorus of constant singing of insects, the prevalence of men with machine guns at the airport and on the roads, and the heavy greenness of the banana and plaintain trees, with their fruit spreading upward on their stalks.

We met Presbytery staff first in a small and simple but clean one-room office, which was mercifully air-conditioned. At that point we were divided up between the families that would host us; each from our team of four would be whisked away by a family from 4 different churches in the Presbytery. I'm not going to lie: as we departed with our hosts, we all looked longingly at the air-conditioned Presbytery office, which had mattresses for when guests visited. It looked so safe and cool and restful-- not to mention the running toilet-- with shops right outside where we could buy bottled water and snacks.

But the Colombian leadership had different plans for us. I hopped into a taxi with Bernardino, a pastor in a church several towns away. Mary Sue, the eldest from our group, who did not speak Spanish and was slightly

deaf, but luckily is well-travelled and always up for an adventure, gamely hopped onto a bus with her host, and Susanna rode off with her host, Martha, also a pastor, to yet another town. Only Daniel, who was a college student, got to stay in the 5-star Presbytery office.

As it turned out, our home visits changed us and our relationships with our hosts, in ways that never would have happened if we had only stayed together at the Presbytery office. We compared notes two days later and each of us who went out to the smaller villages had stories of what sorts of lizards shared their beds, the roosters that were our alarm clocks, toileting adventures, communication bloopers, and amazing food. Mary Sue, though she couldn't speak with (or hear) her hosts, relied on her skills from her days as an elementary school librarian. She drew pictures, played games, and before long was giggling with the girls who lived in her home. As for me, without Daniel and Susanna, who spoke excellent Spanish, as my crutches, I had to go out on a limb to communicate, but I realized I knew and acquired more Spanish than I thought I would. Pastor Bernardino brought me to his church, and was able to speak candidly with me, pastor to pastor, about the challenge of ministering to a people who have lived through so much violence and trauma. Susanna, though she pretty much begged the leadership to let her stay in the air-conditioned Presbytery office and swore she'd never come back to Uraba, ended up striking up such a friendship with her host Pastora Martha, who is a kindred, sassy spirit, that Susanna signed up for a month-long mission accompanier post in Uraba shortly after our return to the United States. Daniel's time at his own at the air-conditioned Presbytery office was not so lonely, since the moderator of the denomination and the Presbytery staff hung out with him. In Colombia, the youth are the lifeblood of the church. So while Daniel hung out with the Presbytery leadership, he enjoyed being treated as an equal and standing on his own, free for two days from a group of women a generation or two older than him who tended to helicopter over him with our love and care. We realized our hosts were completely worthy of our trust. They knew what our sensitive gringo

stomachs could handle, and we quickly realized they would lead us into nothing that would compromise our safety. The difference between staying together at the Presbytery office and staying separately as guests of our host families, even with-- or especially with-- the vulnerabilities that brought, was the difference between being a volunteer tourist and being an invested sister or brother in Christ. As we left, instead of achieving something so remarkable that the community was indebted to us in gratitude, we left with a sense of indebtedness and gratitude for them. Following our pilgrimage, we acted on our sense of commitment to our friends in Colombia by visiting US Congress offices and advocating for the peacemaking steps the church told us needed the support of the US government. There have been more pilgrimages to Colombia since, as well as people who have become Mission Accompaniers, and my former church also receives delegations from Colombia visiting their US friends.

When we agree to become messengers of God's love and justice, our feet may be called to step onto some dry and dusty places. Indeed, if we are sharing God's truth, we may even meet hostilities. Sometimes, the path may be dry and dusty, and we will need to shake the dust off of our feet. But instead of assuming in advance the witness we have learned as disciples of Jesus Christ is *not* something others want or need to hear, consider it instead a blessing to be part of a story worth sharing. Isaiah tells us, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" May God bless your feet, and the encounters they bring to you. Amen.