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Shake it Off! (Testimonial Dust)

Mark 6: 1-13

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In just the last couple years, young girls have been blessed with a few powerful ballads that they can truly call their own. The snow queen Elsa in the Disney movie “Frozen” seemed to be the original trendsetter. Just about all girls under 20, and a good number over 20, can croon out the lyrics to “Let it Go.” And it’s not a man’s song ABOUT the princess - rather, she sings her own song about transforming from an obedient daughter to a young woman who has to figure out how to live her own life. It’s a good message, and has a catchy tune. It may even be called enjoyable when you haven’t heard it a hundred million times over!

Along that same trend, today I want to share with you the theology of Taylor Swift because for this week at least, it matches up with the biblical text. Her song “Shake it off!” is another one of the good songs for girls because it recounts Swift’s own story of being gossiped about, rejected, and needing to shake the dust off her own high-heeled sandals. Responding to what “they say” about her, she says, “The haters are gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate – so I’m just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake it off.”

As for these two biblical stories we find back to back in Mark’s gospel – Jesus is astonished at being treated as just another ordinary working guy in his hometown; therefore, he then offers very specific advice to his disciples as they go out to preach the good news two by two. They are to shake the dust off their sandals in testimony against those who would reject them. When Jesus went back home to preach, people took offense at him. They hurled insults at

him. Who does he think he is? He's just Mary's son. That, by the way, was intended to be an insult – just like kids still try to shame boys by saying they have too close of an association to their mothers. Kids were typically known as the Son of their Father. Only Mark records that sleight, and we could very easily miss it. Jesus himself was so taken aback that he couldn't fulfill his whole mission there. He healed a few people and moved on.

So that's the very same advice he gives to his disciples – travel light and move on if you're not being heard. He's preparing them for the mixed kind of reception they are going to get. He encourages them to travel in pairs. It's easy to feel crazy when you're on your own, but when you have a partner to strengthen your resolve, it helps. Yet he also gives them the difficult charge to trust in the kindness of others. They aren't to be seen as beggars. They are to be taken in by those who would eagerly receive their message. They were to depend upon others for food and shelter, and maybe even a change of clothes. I don't know about that “only one tunic” option if he really wanted folks to take them in. That tunic probably got a little ripe after a few days on the road. Then, if all else fails, use your dusty feet as a sign against them if they don't really listen.

Jesus offers his disciples a creative form of retaliation – this testimonial dust. I like it. To me it has an oddly Taylor Swift kind of ring to it. She also got treated differently when she lost her “innocent” image and started pushing back against those who wanted to judge her life from the outside. As she started calling out reporters about their ridiculously personal questions and her song “Shake it Off” became quite popular, she let people know that it wasn't OK to judge, not even pop stars. In an interview with ABC's Amy Robach, she talks about the meaning of her song. She says: “The message in ['Shake It Off'] is a problem we all deal with on a daily basis. We don't live just in a celebrity takedown culture, we live in a takedown culture. People will

find anything about you and twist it to where it's weird or wrong or annoying or strange or bad. You have to not only live your life in spite of people who don't understand you — you have to have more *fun* than they do.”

Jesus was not going to let a few detractors keep his ministry from moving forward. He made sure his disciples were made of the kind of stuff so that they would do the same. To allow our critics to challenge us is one thing, to let them weigh us down is quite another. Shaking off the dust is a symbol, quite a contemporary symbol of letting it go and shaking it off. Frozen's Elsa and Taylor Swift are empowering pre-teen girls to face with courage the onslaught of the image police that is inevitably coming their way. It's the same for boys, has been for a long time. Jesus was called a Mama's boy – way back – and he knew that those kinds of insults had no place, and would give him no shame.

Perhaps you, in your own life, believe you are WAY beyond those kinds of shenanigans. There comes a time in life when insults, real or perceived, no longer matter to us quite so much. But in our youth, those perceptions of others mean so very much. Young people want to be liked, and want their statuses to be liked. They want praise and popularity. They want their image to be flawless. But that's not how the real world is. Swift is discerning in saying we live in a “takedown culture.” There are those who make themselves feel better by putting someone else down. Do you realize how desperately young people need to understand this? Young people kill themselves over it. The bullying, the teasing, the incessant measuring up – it tears at them day after day. AND if there's something genuinely different about them, it only seems to get worse.

They need people who will walk with them for the journey. They need partners who will listen so that when they get into that pattern of questioning themselves, an older, wiser person

might just be able to help them shake off that dust and move on. Now I know that our church is not filled to overflowing with young people – but you know young people, either in your family or your community. You run into college students or seminary interns or the kids down the street.

I don't know exactly what Jesus had in his mind with his disciples' plan for preaching, but it makes me curious. How is Jesus calling us to partner with one another? We need one another to be able to preach the good news in a takedown culture. We need the enthusiasm and drive of young people and the wisdom and adaptability of age. We are inspired to trust without boundaries and barriers of who has the means to do so. And we are given permission to shake off the dust when our love is rejected. We don't have to keep banging our heads against solid walls. That's good news too, and a beautiful reminder for young people.

In talking about these songs today, some of you will leave humming those tunes all afternoon, and some of you may leave and never ever recognize those songs even if they're playing on the musak in some store in the grocery store. But for me, I hear in this message a call to listen to the young ones, to pay attention to my daughter and the messages she gets from the songs she like, and to pay attention to my son and the messages he gets from teenage social media. It's an interesting world in which we live. The good news needs messengers who keep on keeping on – even when it seems hostile to do so. Who will keep the message alive? Jesus is counting on us to not only look forward, but to reach back and offer the good news to the next generation. Amen.

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

6 He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.² On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary^[a] and brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense^[b] at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

The Mission of the Twelve

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If 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." ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.¹³ They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.