

"Struggles are not new; neither is Perseverance"

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew's United Church, Sudbury*

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Readings: Ezekiel 2:1-7 and Mark 6:1-13

We can look for the special, the unique, even the mystical and the amazing in the biblical witness, and we will find it. It is there for the reader to discern and ponder. There are incidents that speak about the unusual and unexpected.

With Jesus, there are words that inspire, events that transform others, and encounters that lead to healings and life restored.

But then there are events that remind us that Jesus lived, for the most part, an ordinary life in an ordinary community and had to put up with the ordinary responses of people in his own surroundings.

Jesus, it is clear, already has a bit of a reputation as someone gifted as he enters his home community and presents himself and his teachings as found in today's reading from Mark.

But the people who know him do not care. They know Jesus. They saw him grow up. They remember his attitude when he was young, and probably some of them could count the number of times he had to be called home for dinner more than once. Why, there were probably people in the synagogue who had changed his diapers and washed his childhood scrapes.

Messiah? Hardly - maybe outspoken or even uncontrollable kid. But Messiah? Not in your life.

Robert Hamerton-Kelly in his book ***The Gospel and the Sacred*** Offers a helpful analysis of the dynamic Jesus faced. We all like to have heroes – role models we can look up to guide and inspire.

Yet when those role models are those with whom we have grown up, then there is an ambivalence. We want to be excited by what they bring, but we wonder why they had success and we did not. And so we are bitter and turn against the very person we have made our hero, even if only for a moment.

For such a person who has been put on a pedestal and then quickly denounced and ridiculed, the struggles are real. But they are hardly new. History is filled with people seen as heroic and powerful, only to be diminished and ridiculed as they lose favour with the very people who pumped up their value and gifts. The answer to such struggles is perseverance.

Reading biographies of many of the people who have become world leaders is a who's who of those who have struggled and persevered in early years of their lives. Few have a privileged background as did a George W. Bush – most have worked hard to get through school, get a university education, find opportunities and make the most of them.

It was that kind of attitude that Jesus shared with his disciples as he sent them out into the world, two by two.

Not alone, but with someone else; not a mob, but a pairing. Not without tools, but not with all of the answers on a platter. They had to discern what was right, and make sure there was room for adapting to the climate and realities around them.

Success at any setting depends upon adaptability. So it is with Jesus – he needed to be adaptable to deal with the ways that those who knew him dealt with him, but he also needed to be adaptable to engage those he met along the way.

The British psychoanalyst John Bowlby studied the interactions of mothers with their children over many decades. He learned that a healthy relationship between child and parent, especially mother, at a young age allowed for the development of the individual into a confident and capable adult.

Jesus, no doubt, had a good relationship with his mother. But more than that, despite the reaction to him as he matured, he was part of a supportive and caring community.

The modern comment, made popular by Hilary Clinton when first lady, “It takes a village to raise a child,” is a truism worth remembering and noting. Indeed, for many years the elementary school in Richard’s Landing on St. Joseph’s Island had on the wall of its gym: “It takes a village to raise a child; we have a whole island.”

Jesus handled any sense of rejection he experienced because he already experienced love, acceptance, and encouragement.

When we are certain that what we do matters, we can persevere. Personal value and commitment does make a difference, and it is all the more possible when we are seen as important to others – those close to us, and those who surround us.

Jesus was not without challenges and criticism – yet the confidence he had was built upon a clear sense of purpose, and a community that nourished him and ultimately cherished his gifts.

That is what the church is at its best – a nurturing, supportive community, interested in being a permission-granting institution to help people develop their skills, and meet their goals.

May we be that kind of community, wherever we live our faith, and share our hope, this day and always.