In today’s scripture from Mark, we pick up with Jesus still early in his ministry. Two weeks ago, we heard and reflected on the story of Jesus taking time out from preaching to rest in a boat, then calming the fears of the disciples when a storm comes up. Today he is traveling home for the first time since his ministry began. We are not sure how long it has been since he has been to his home town of Nazareth, but it was early in his ministry. It probably had not been long since he had been working carpentry here in Nazareth.

He walks back into town, but instead of going home, he starts teaching at the synagogue. That’s new for him. And while some were amazed, the quotes we get are from people who were not wowed.

“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph,[a] Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

In Nazareth, they didn't see a great teacher, healer, or savior. They saw the man they knew, the man they had seen grow up, the man they maybe had seen make mistakes. He was so ordinary, so far from their view of what the messiah should or would be. And so they diminished him, ridiculed him. They refused to accept him in his fullness, in his greatness. They were blinded by how regular he was.

Now, none of us has been a great teacher and healer like Jesus, none of us has ever been someone the world would call a Messiah, but we do know what it’s like to be rejected, to be diminished, and to be publicly humiliated. Sometimes it is people we know well who take us for granted. That’s what happened to Jesus. But sometimes it’s people we don’t even know who judge us by the way we look, what we are wearing, our age, our skin color, our gender, or anything else they think they can tell about us. We get stereotyped and then excluded. Or we have to work really hard to overcome those pre-judgments.

For me, this happened a lot early in my career in ministry. I graduated seminary at the ripe old age of 24. My first job was as a hospital trauma chaplain. I was the person that was there when “God forbid” happened in anybody’s life. Trauma is often a great equalizer, it brings people down to feeling vulnerable and in that moment they didn’t care who was there to pray with them, they would take it. But in many many other less traumatic situations, I would walk into a hospital room and introduce myself as the chaplain and I would get diminished, I would get any number of rejections from laughter, “you’re kidding, you couldn’t possibly be the chaplain,” to indignation, “there’s no way I
would talk to a female chaplain.” They were not going to take me or my ministry seriously. But what did that mean for me? I learned from those experiences and what I learned from Jesus, especially Jesus in stories like the one we have today.

The rejection by people of Nazareth is really not that surprising, but Jesus’ response has a few surprises in it. Does he take that message in? Does he let it discourage him? No because his identity was not grounded in the people of Nazareth or in their acceptance. He stayed grounded in two things—his identity and his mission, which are two separate but closely linked.

His identity was grounded as the Son of GOD, a beloved and chosen, full of love and grace. He was there to bring healing and hope. They could not take that away from him. For me, this meant constantly reminding myself of my true identity as a called minister serving God. Nobody who laughed at me could take that away from me. Nobody who rejects you can take it away from you either. So that’s first, staying grounded in our true identity.

Secondly, Jesus stayed grounded in the broader mission. If this town, didn’t want the message, he didn’t give up on the message, he took it to the next town, and he sent the disciples to even more towns. For me, that meant that I had to accept given my particular identity, I was not going to be the best minister for every single person on the planet, but that was because of their hang ups not mine. I had to have faith that God would help me find the ministries that would be right for both me and those I was ministering to and those I was working with.

And that is what Jesus teaches the disciples in the second part of today’s scripture lesson. He sends the disciples out and tells them explicitly what to do when they are inevitably rejected somewhere. He had just been rejected in his hometown, so these scenes are obviously linked together. So he says to them “And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

Shake off the dust. Don’t take the rejection personally, just move on to the next place where you will receive a welcome. So up here we have a welcome mat, what do we use these for? We shake off the dust literally. So, we have this up here today to help us with a little exercise. Each of us here has a little dust. We have a little residual effects of being diminished, of our authority questioned, of our whole selves being out right rejected. If we are not careful, that dust can pile up on us. So I want to take a moment to give this dust to God. So let’s get into a place of our own personal dust…

Now, whenever you see a dust mat, you are called to consider what dust you may be carrying and to shake it off as best you can.

So, here at Hope church sometimes we have collective dust. We bring our rejections and wounds here together to the safety and acceptance of this sanctuary. We have lovingly
called ourselves the Island of Misfit Toys from the old classic Christmas movie, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Clip or description

The analogy is right on in that God calls the misfits. Nobody is perfect. God works through ordinary people. It’s true again and again in the Bible. Moses was just a regular guy who was afraid of public speaking. Rahab was a common woman of ill-repute who dared to risk her life to warn Joshua and save a whole city. Jesus was an ordinary person and even he was deemed a misfit sometimes. His disciples were not always accepted either. God wants to be in the real relationships, with all of us broken toys.

Island of misfit toys, they have dust, they have been seriously rejected, but it is not so well shaken off.

The misfit toys get stuck under their dust and under their rejection. They are waiting for the world to call them back and to accept them, which never happens. The island part of the misfit toys is the part we should reject. When we shake off the dust, we are saying we are misfits and proud. It’s a world where people pretend that they are not misfits that is wrong. The illusion of perfection, the illusion that one person can be better than another. We reject that illusion.

So, now we go out and engage that world, empowered by our identity, grounded in Christ who also was rejected—rejected in Nazareth, rejected by humanity and sentenced to death on a cross. Because of Christ, we can stay strong in our faith and in our mission.

And so now God needs us. This story is amazing because it shows us the true heart of God, who loves us and who wants to teach, heal and serve the world through ordinary people, regular rejects like us. The work will not get done without us. So shake of the dust and let’s get to work. Shake off the dust and let’s find some more misfits. Shake of the dust and spread the good news. Shake off the dust and participate in transformation. Shake off the dust.