“***The Dust of Your Town***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, July 7, 2019

**Gal 6:1–6**

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. 2Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. . . . 4All must test their own work; then that work . . . will become a cause for pride. 5For all must carry their own loads.

**Luke 10:5, 9–11, 16–20**

5“Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ . . . 9And say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ 10But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 11‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near. . .’”

16“Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.” 17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” 18He said to them, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. 19See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. 20Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

I find three very different but relatable, messages from the Scriptures this week.

The first message is about learning a lesson. It can be pleasing to learn a lesson; we get to save the best and leave the rest. But sometimes learning comes with pain. This lesson is that we all have to leave something behind in life. It may mean leaving behind a person or a group of people who have been hurtful. It may mean quitting a company that crushes your spirit, or even to stop using a store where they don’t treat you well. You learn through experience that sometimes you need to walk away.

Here, Jesus is bringing that same lesson to his traveling apostles, telling them to wipe off their feet the dust of a town that rejects them. Wiping the dust off means not letting the memory cling to you, or disturb you. Don’t let people occupy your mind rent-free. Wipe them off and move on. Don’t be resentful about rejection, especially since they only hurt themselves. The townspeople failed to recognize that the kingdom of God had come near, and they wouldn’t listen.

In fact, here is a lesson I have learned: not to take people’s meanness personally even when it is *meant* personally. Don’t take it to heart, even when they *mean* to hurt you. Don’t internalize someone else’s ill feeling, and don’t lose faith in God’s guidance. There are times in my life that I have had to repeat the mantra, “don’t take it personally; don’t take it personally,” because I was tempted to do so. Have you ever had that experience, when you were doing your best, or you had an interesting idea, and some people treated it like a crime? Jesus had a saying that applies here: “Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house” (Mark 6:4). You don’t have to *literally* be a prophet for that saying to apply to you. If you can see more than your contemporaries, that might be enough to turn them against you. But wipe the dust of the negative comments off, leaving them behind.

So that’s the first lesson for today—that you *will* be unjustly treated in this world! Jesus warned us of that. But if you keep your eyes on the prize, you can be confident of achieving it. Stay focused on what is right and good, whether the world *honors* it or not. If your goals are spiritual, they are permanent, and they will be vindicated. If you really believe that God, in the long run, preserves and uplifts the good, despite all resistance, then it becomes easier to wipe off the dust of those places, and move on.

Now what about that strange and fascinating line, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning”? That’s *really* a confidence booster, if you can believe it. Jesus says Satan himself has fallen. Now sometimes, in apocalyptic literature, an author will use the present tense to prophesy about the future, but I don’t think he’s doing that. He *saw* the fall of Satan, and that forces us to rethink our philosophy about evil, since evil continues after Satan’s fall. We have to stop blaming Satan for all the evil in the world. Human beings are responsible for our own deliberate evil-doing.

So, should we stop expecting a supernatural solution to evil, but deal with it through human means? Probably. Sometimes we attack evil through legislative reform, or replace it by better thinking and better institutions. Sometimes evil destroys itself. And *occasionally* it is overcome by self-critique and spiritual rebirth.

The apostles delighted in discovering that they had the power to drive out demons, but Jesus said they should not rejoice over that, but “rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). This is the same lesson that I found at the end of my reflection about walking away from rejecters, namely, that God vindicates the right, and makes all goodness permanent. Don’t rejoice over your victories or even your spiritual power; rejoice at the *permanence* of goodness and truth, as a great line in the psalms says: “The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me” (138:8), or, in the King James ver.: “The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me.” God is interested in perfecting us, not for our ego’s sake, but for goodness’ sake. Really! God works for goodness’ sake. Rejoice over *that*!

So, can Galatians fit in here? *Yes*, if we focus on goodness! It has that amazing, tender line: “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2). What an inspiring rule for a church to follow! This doesn’t mean some people constantly mooching off others, since it also teaches self-reliance, saying “all must carry their own loads” (6:5). And further, “All must test their own work,” so that we don’t become proud (6:4). We need to critique our own work, not for the sake of self-doubt or shame, but just for the sake of honest loyalty to the values and not to the self. Nevertheless, it is good sometimes to let someone help you bear *your* burden, to share it. Let yourself be loved.

So today’s message had to do with not being overwhelmed with hurt if someone rejects you. Learn to wipe their dust off your sandals and move on. You have values, and you have validity. Our message also spoke of having confidence in the eventual triumph of goodness, *and* of your own heavenly destiny. As W. E. Channing affirmed, we can’t really accept “perfection being broken off almost at its beginning” (*Works*, 356). And finally the message was about doing good within the congregation, bearing one another’s burdens, caring for others, while also being responsible for one’s own actions. Test your own work. But also let yourself be nurtured here and now by the fruits of the spirit, such as joy, peace, and gentleness (Gal 5:22–23). Those are the opposite of dust. You *want* those to cling to you!