My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

It’s counter-intuitive, learning how to fall. At a young age, my father took the training wheels off my bicycle, and as I went a little too fast on our oiled macadam streets, my bike swept out from under me and I split open my knee pretty badly. I learned that uncontrolled crashing was a bad thing.

And so later in life, as I grew up, I would be asked in various situations to let go in a controlled manner, like somersaulting and rolling on one’s shoulder when off-balance to avoid injury. I resisted these techniques, and other injuries followed when I was swept off my feet with various magnitudes of orthopedic injury and recovery. But traumatic memory has a special grip on us, doesn’t it? I couldn’t—actually wouldn’t—learn to fall. I simply walked away.

In our text today, Jesus and the disciples arrive in Jesus’ hometown. The story, often titled “A Prophet Without Honor,” is providently placed just as Jesus prepares to take the training wheels off and send the Twelve out on their first missionary trip. Now as much as we seem to enjoy casting the disciples in the role of folks who don’t or just refuse to get it, I can draw a straight line from their fumbling and bumbling and seeming resistance to my own. So I’m growing in my respect for Mark’s Gospel by the way our gospel writer documents this introduction to discipleship class.

I’d like to invite us to see the Twelve with new eyes. We should cut them some slack as not knowing it all as soon as they were called; maybe they’re less the clueless dimwits who should have figured it out by now, but rather students who are beginners learning a new skill. And they’re going to get some lessons in how to tumble and roll, not knowing what that really means. But I’m getting ahead of us; let’s review what they have learned in following Jesus around to date.

Mark chapters 1–5 gives an excellent overview of Jesus’ discipleship101 class. Jesus starts to train the people who’ve been set apart to replicate his ministry. Jesus’ methods include verbal teaching, eliciting questions, and demonstrating core competencies; his content covers such subjects that might be titled “The Buzz about Beelzebul” or “Family Is Relative.” Midway through the semester, Jesus introduces the concept of a “master story,” meant to contextualize their whole mission going forward. “Listen up,” Jesus says.

And Jesus begins unpacking the parable of the soils with the admonition, “you might want to remember this—it’s going to be on the midterm.” Following the tutorial on “The Smallness of Big Things” (lessons learned from a mustard seed), Jesus crams the Twelve onto a too-small boat so he can teach them to tame their fear of disequilibrium. And then it’s off to the tombs for “Practicum: The Ins and Outs of Exorcism.” Finally, all these interruptions force him to alter his teaching plan. Jesus offers an impromptu lesson: “How to Stop Time.”

As they near the end of their introductory training, the disciples are poised to hit the road for some applied learning. But first there is one more requirement: they have to learn to fall. This will not be enjoyable—he has not inquired about their abilities to withstand traumatic events, whether it’s physical, emotional, or spiritual —but Jesus knows that being his followers make them easy targets, as he will make clear just before the final exams in Jerusalem (Mark 13:13). So, no matter how much teaching they’ve taken in, they have to learn to take a tumble—or they might just end up being broken bits like Humpty Dumpty even before they really get started.

Jesus has a deep well-spring to draw from for this lesson. The prophets before him, from Jeremiah to Ezekiel, are well stocked with warnings about the wall of resistance that awaits any would-be message bearer, especially if it doesn’t agree with the powers-that-be. Psalms suggest a steady diet of scorn that will be served up to those who serve. But Jesus takes the deep-dive approach, bringing the disciples along to observe his own beat-down at the hands of his hometown community. ‘Maybe,’ Jesus surmises, ‘if they can see me survive a fall from rock star fame in front of my homies, the Twelve will learn to take their lumps when they get thrown from their high horse. Then it’s back in the saddle.’

The less-than-celebratory reception in Nazareth comes as no surprise to anyone who’s been following the story. Jesus’ place in the pecking order was settled at birth. The shame and honor police are always near, and Jesus’ family trying to nip his budding career amid rumors that he was off his rocker were the talk of the synagogue. So despite his success outside of Nazareth, the hometown crowd is having none of it. Mark doesn’t tell us what Jesus teaches in the synagogue.

But I don’t know if it matters that much with the judgy crowd. They’ve come to their conclusions, don’t bother them with the facts. They know who they are.

Jesus is hanging with the other side of the culture wars: the homeless, sex workers, undocumented immigrants, juvenile delinquents, LGBTQ persons, and everyone else they can think of who don’t belong in their ideation of proper society. They don’t want to learn how to see others. They’re on top the pedestal looking down on others, making sure anyone they approve of not only can’t get to them, but can’t get up at all. If the synagogue folks have their way, these others will be falling their entire lives.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

The surprising thing is what happens after the unpleasantness in the synagogue. In the wake of being written off as a wannabe by his own people, Jesus forgoes the luxury of licking his wounds. Instead, he dusts himself off and goes back to work. And he falls, and falls again, in plain view. The gospel of Matthew reports only that Jesus “did not do many deeds of power there.” But Mark’s gospel doesn’t whitewash Jesus’ experience with his home church, telling us straight up that “he could do ***no*** deed of power there.”

Thanks to the thick culture of disbelief in Nazareth, the power of a fire-hose pressured tap of living water for those who believe and follow the God of diversity, equity, and inclusion is now just a tiny drip.

Class dismissed.

Will the falling lessons come in handy when the Twelve set out on their own? The aura of success around their return suggests otherwise. But as the road gets harder, all of them—except Judas—will pass the final. And though at this point in my life I’d rather count my accomplishments, walking with Jesus has taught me that there is grace to be found, at last, in learning to fall.

Thanks be to God, Amen.