

Sermon July 5, 2015 Mark 6:1-13 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 “Discovering God’s Sufficiency”

The two lessons we heard read today offer those of us who are trying to follow Jesus Christ challenge and hope.

In Mark’s Gospel, which we’ve been reading for several weeks, things had gone well for Jesus, until now. Consider: Jesus had power to calm the storm, he had cast out demons and healed a woman no doctor had been able to help, and he had even brought a young girl back from death. Not a bad start for a ministry! But then he went to his home town, where his success pretty much ground to a halt.

He preached, and the folks were “astounded”. “Where did he get all this?” they demanded. “He’s Mary’s boy...” And in those days, when it was said like that instead of “He’s Joseph’s son,” it meant trouble. Back then, to define a person’s parentage with reference only to the mother inferred that the identity of the father was questionable. The hometown folks “took offense” at Jesus, so that he could not do all that much there.

What are we supposed to hear from this account? The folks who knew Jesus the best, who had seen him grow up and had gone to school with him, were those least able to recognize what God was doing through his life. Perhaps this is a warning to Christians today who think we know Jesus really well, who may assume that we know what he wants our church or our individual lives to do, that we should be ready to let him be offensive to us sometimes, even if it really challenges us.

Several years ago I attended a Festival of Homiletics (preaching) in Atlanta, where I was blessed to hear a huge variety of excellent preachers. One of the preachers mentioned that Kenneth Lay (who had headed up the huge energy company Enron, which (in 2003?) was exposed as horribly corrupt and deceptive in its accounting, ruining the financial lives of thousands of people) had just died that week, and that he had been a member of a large United Methodist Church in Texas. The speaker wondered what kind of Gospel Kenneth Lay had heard preached over the years, that would have allowed him to be apparently so unconcerned with his own accumulation of wealth and his deception that led to so many innocent people to be financially devastated. The preacher reminded us that a read through Jesus’ teachings tends to offer huge challenges about how we handle money, particularly in light of the needs of those around us. In other words, Jesus’ Gospel is offensive to those of us who try to find security in our possessions. Jesus’ Gospel tells us to give to anyone who asks, to be attentive to the needs of our neighbors. Jesus’ Gospel challenges us to offer love and forgiveness when somebody throws hatred at us.

So do we who claim to be Jesus’ followers end up like his hometown folks, so that we amaze and dismay him with our unbelief? If so, is it any wonder we only occasionally witness very much of his power?

Immediately after this challenging experience, Mark tells us that Jesus sent his disciples out to do the same kind of work he had been doing, casting out demons and healing people. He gave

them authority, and he told them to leave their bags at home. “Take only a staff, nothing else.” I don’t know about you, but his instructions totally go against my grain! I want my toothbrush, a map, a credit card, a good amount of cash hidden in various places so I won’t lose it all if something happens, my insurance information, plus at least a couple of days worth of clothes.

*No*, Jesus said. Take nothing but a staff. In other words, *trust God*. The same way I think I need a long list of stuff for a journey, I have trouble trusting God. But the power comes, it would seem, precisely as we *do* let go of our grasp on our own preparations and itineraries and definitions of “success.” So we who would be followers have been given yet another challenge through today’s “offensive” Gospel.

This brings us to Paul. Paul had learned to know Jesus as he was thrown to the ground and blinded by light and the risen Lord had asked him, “Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Saul, later known as Paul, had been feverishly trying to stamp out Christianity, since at first he believed it to be a heresy among Jews.) Out of that experience on the Damascus Road, Paul grew to become a powerful instrument through whom Christianity spread to all parts of the Roman Empire. He preached and traveled and established new churches and wrote most of the Epistles in the New Testament. Paul ended up being a powerful witness to the Living Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Thank God that we have today’s passage from 2 Corinthians! Otherwise, I would find Paul to be too “perfect,” too untouchable. In today’s lesson and in the verses preceding it, Paul’s struggles shine through. He struggled with the church in Corinth. He had established it and then moved on, trying to teach the Corinthian Christians correspondence-style. But in Corinth he faced a lot of criticism as well as conflict and competition among the Corinthian Christians as they vied for power and position. So he had to defend himself quite a bit, as some would-be leaders said that Paul was not a true apostle, that he didn’t have enough power, that he was unimpressive for various reasons.

As Paul struggled with this, he also confided that he had a struggle with God. Paul had some sort of condition (a “thorn,” he called it) that he prayed “three times” (fervently) for God to heal or remove. God did not. The best he could receive from God about his affliction was “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9)

In this, whatever the affliction was, Paul was forced to let go of his self-sufficiency. His boast could be only in the power and steadfast love and wisdom of God. There he found his strength: “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” (Vs. 10)

So what do we need to hear today? That we need to listen to our Lord carefully, and not be like those who think they know him so well they get all uppity if he says something that makes us feel uncomfortable. All through his ministry, Jesus went around upsetting things, especially the status quo. If we’re comfortable as Christians and in our walk as followers, we probably are not listening or hearing Jesus very well.

But if we do dare to hear him and to recognize his challenge to us and to this world, we are promised that just where we feel the least prepared and uncomfortably weak, there can be the most powerful experience of what God can do. Which is really what the whole Bible is about: not what WE can do, but what *God* has chosen to do: to work through people like us to bring God's love and will fully into this world.

I share a story that has made the rounds for years, entitled "A Glass of Milk."

One day, a poor boy who was selling goods from door to door to pay his way through school found he had only one thin dime left, and he was hungry. He decided to ask for a meal at the next house. However, he lost his nerve when a lovely young woman opened the door. Instead of a meal, he asked for a drink of water. The young woman thought he looked hungry so she brought him a large glass of milk. He drank it slowly, and then asked, "How much do I owe you?" "You don't owe me anything," she replied. "Mother has always taught us never to accept pay for a kindness." He said, "Then I thank you from my heart." As Howard Kelly left that house, he not only felt stronger physically, but his faith in God and man was stronger also. He had been ready to give up and quit.

Years later that young woman became critically ill. The local doctors were baffled. They finally sent her to the big city, where they called in specialists to study her rare disease. Dr. Howard Kelly was called in for the consultation. When he heard the name of the town she came from, a strange light filled his eyes.

Immediately he rose and went down the hall of the hospital to her room. Dressed in his doctor's gown, he went in to see her. He recognized her at once. He determined to do his best to save her life. From that day he gave special attention to the case. After a long struggle, the battle was won.

Since this happened long before health insurance companies and big business dictated health care, before the woman was discharged Dr. Kelly asked the business office to pass the final bill to him for approval. He looked at it, then wrote something on the edge and the bill was sent to the woman's room. She was afraid to open it, for she was sure it would take the rest of her life to pay for it. Finally she looked, and read these words, written on the side of the bill: "Paid in full with one glass of milk" - Signed, Dr. Howard Kelly.

Tears of joy flooded her eyes as her happy heart prayed: "Thank You, God, that Your love has so spread abroad through human hearts and hands."

It might have been much easier if God had simply put on a huge "God-show." God could, you know, with special effects bigger than the "X-Men" or Terminator movies. Instead, God has chosen to do it the hard way, to work through human hearts and the hands and gifts of men and women who are often not so sure about God or themselves.... This is true power, where our Lord, just as he did so many years ago, invites us to follow him and to risk sharing his love and power with others as we step out in faith, having been assured that God's grace is sufficient for all our needs. God can use OUR hands and hearts for his purposes in this world. Thank God!