

Jesus Commissions His Disciples

Our Gospel lesson today examined how people who knew Him couldn't get beyond Jesus' past. The people in His hometown couldn't get past Him as just a simple carpenter. Despite this, He continues His ministry, and commissions His disciples to do the same sort of healing miracles He had been doing. One thing I want to point out in the Gospel lesson is Jesus' statement to His disciples: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt," (Mark 6:8-9).

These instructions from Jesus focus on a dependence on God, and the hospitality of others. By taking nothing with them, the disciples must rely entirely on God's provision and the kindness of those they encounter. This dependence is a practical demonstration of the principle the apostle Paul gives us in 2 Cor. 12:2-10. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn there with me so we can read it together. **Read 2 Cor. 12:2-10.**

Our epistolary lesson this morning offers us some great insight into the nature of suffering, the mystery of divine grace poured out for us from the cross of Jesus Christ, and what would seem to be the confusing power of weakness. Paul begins by telling about an extraordinary spiritual experience. On first reading it, it sounds fantastic – almost hard to believe. It makes one wonder who he's talked to to get this story.

Caught Up to Paradise

Most Bible scholars and commentaries suggest that Paul's speaking here from personal experience. He says:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. And I know that this man – whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows – was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell, (2 Cor. 12:2-4).

He talks of being caught up into this divine realm, and hearing things he can't express – and that he's not allowed to repeat. What a vision! He admits that he's not sure if he was physically caught up to it, or just a vision, but either way, it left an impact. If we had a vision like that, we might puff out our chests, and go around acting pretty boastful. Our culture teaches us to be pretty braggadocious. People would rather be the winner on *Survivor* than a contestant that gets kicked off fairly quickly.

Our society encourages that kind of attitude. Everything's about winning, succeeding, getting rid of the competition, and looking out for self. Paul tells this story to set the stage for a more important idea that he speaks of next. He says, "I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses,"

(verse 5). He's reluctant to brag about his experience. He had some amazing experiences with Jesus. Probably the one we're most familiar with is his Damascus Road experience in the Book of Acts, where he sees Jesus, is blinded, and then repents and becomes a follower of Christ.

A Thorn in the Flesh

He goes on. "Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations," (verses 6-7a). Paul's showcasing his humility for us, and the importance he places on God's work, rather than on his own spiritual achievements. He shifts from his divine encounter to discuss a persistent personal affliction, referred to as a "thorn in the flesh." Paul states, "Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me," (verse 7b).

We don't know what that thorn was. It may have been bad eyesight, malaria, arthritis, cancer. Through the years scholars have debated the nature of it. Some think it was a physical problem, while others think it was a spiritual or emotional problem. Regardless of the nature of his thorn, it caused Paul significant distress. The thorn, allowed by God, but delivered by Satan, served two purposes. It was a source of suffering, but also a means of spiritual growth.

Three times, Paul says, he pleaded with the Lord to take it away. But the answer he received was unexpected and profound. If your Bible has Jesus' words in red letters, you see that the quote included in verse 9 is directly from Jesus. "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." This response by Jesus is at the heart of what we're getting at today.

His Grace Is Sufficient

Let's take a moment to talk about the grace of God revealed to us through Jesus Christ. God's grace is undeserved. It's the kindness and love of God freely given to us. It's in stark contrast to the lives we try to live. Being independent. Self-sufficient. Trying to overcome our challenges through our own strength and abilities. That's human nature. Paul's experience – and what we can learn here – is that in our moments of greatest weakness, God's grace shines brightest.

His grace being sufficient for us, means that His provision isn't just meeting a need. It's not just barely getting by – it's abundant. It's overflowing and overwhelming. He gives us more than enough for every situation we face. If we try to rely on our strength, though, we limit ourselves to our human abilities and capabilities. When we rely on His grace, we tap into infinite, bottomless resources. He's God!

Here in America, we often equate strength with power and success. We're taught to hide our vulnerabilities – this is especially true of boys and men, we're told things like, "real men don't cry." Yes we do! From a young age, we're given examples of

people who project an image of control, even when their world's are spiraling wildly out of control.

The kingdom of God operates on a different principle – dependence upon God alone. By depending on God, Paul allowed the power of Christ – he tells us this at the end of verse 9, “the power of Christ may rest on me.” When we acknowledge our weaknesses and surrender them to God, we make space for His power to work in us and through us. That’s what we should want, if we’re really following Jesus Christ.

True power isn’t found in self-reliance, but in fully relying on God. When we’re at our weakest, that’s when God’s strength is most evident and effective in our lives. Instead of lamenting his thorn, Paul chose to boast in his weaknesses. It’s counter-cultural. It doesn’t fit the American way of doing things.

Sandra Day O’Connor

We have a little bit of time left, so I want to share a story I read once in a *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book. There was once a guy who dreamed of going to Stanford University named Harry Day. Harry’s dad died just before he was supposed to go to college, and Harry got stuck running the family ranch in New Mexico. Life was rough. The house he lived in had no electricity or running water and was miles from the nearest city.

Eventually Harry met Ada, and they got married. When the time came for them to have their first child, Sandra, they had to drive 200 miles to El Paso, Texas, to the nearest hospital. As the little girl grew, there wasn’t even a school within driving distance. Ada home schooled her daughter, and eventually they sent the girl to live with her grandparents so she could be closer to a boarding school. Eventually, Sandra would grow up to go to Stanford University, and in 1952, she graduated law school near the top of her class.

She tried to join a law firm, but the only job they’d give her was as a receptionist. She eventually got married, had a family, and became an established attorney out west. In 1980, the Attorney General of the United States called her on the phone to tell her that President Reagan had nominated her to be the first woman Justice of the Supreme Court. Sandra Day O’Connor would appear before the Senate two days later, and was unanimously confirmed.

I suspect that since Sandra Day O’Connor wasn’t born with a silver spoon in her mouth she may have had a “thorn in the side” when it came to her academics. As a woman, she certainly had a “thorn in the side” in regards to her career. With her ability to see both sides of most cases the Supreme Court heard while she was on it, she was probably a “thorn in the side” to some in the political establishment in DC. She had good old fashioned common sense.

In Weakness and In Strength

Boasting in our weakness isn't about glorifying our struggles or taking pride in our hardships. It's more about recognizing that our vulnerabilities can become vessels for God's grace and power. When we admit our need for Him, we open ourselves to His transformative work in our lives. Paul says, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong," (verse 10).

So how do we apply this truth to our daily lives? Here are some steps all of us – including yours truly – can take. First, we need to be more open about things with which we're vulnerable. You've got thorns – I do, too. By acknowledging our limitations and struggles. Instead of hiding them and feeling ashamed, we need to bring them before God in prayer. His grace is sufficient for us – His power is made perfect in our weakness!

When we face various "thorns," for instance, things aren't going our way, maybe a diagnosis we didn't want to hear, or the loss of a family member, or issues with work – we need to lean into God's grace. As followers of Jesus, we know He will provide the strength, wisdom, and courage needed to face whatever challenges us. Spend time with Him in His word, and let His grace sustain you.

Another thing we should do – we need to do a better job of here – is Paul's idea of "boasting in Christ." We ought to be sharing our testimonies of how God has worked in our lives, and especially in our areas of weakness. Stories of God's faithfulness can inspire and encourage our friends and neighbors who may also be going through similar struggles. And finally, we must cultivate humility – it's in short supply in our society. It's not the American way, to be humble. We should recognize that every achievement and blessing in our lives is a result of God's undeserved, unmerited grace. By having hearts of gratitude, we can give glory to God for the continuing work He's doing in our lives.

God's grace is sufficient. His power is made perfect in our weakness. In a world that celebrates and takes pride in strength, self-sufficiency, and independence, as Jesus' hands and feet in the world, we must be counter-cultural, by embracing our vulnerabilities and fully relying on God. I hope, like Paul, we will boast in our weaknesses, knowing that in these moments Christ's power rests also upon us. He IS with us, lifting us up and carrying us along every step of the way.

Prayer: God of grace and powerful weakness, at times Your prophets were ignored, rejected, belittled, and unwelcome. Trusting that we, too, are called to be prophets, fill us with Your Spirit, and support us by Your gentle hands, that we may persevere in speaking Your word and living our faith. Amen.