

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 5, 2009
Pentecost 5
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Ezekiel 2:1-7
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:1-10
Mark 6:1-6

Our Old Testament lesson, epistle, and Gospel lesson for today are connected by at least one noteworthy theme: in the case of Ezekiel, Paul, and Jesus, we see that they were each called by God and sent by God to bring God's message to human beings in the world. And each of them also learns that responding to God's call brings insults, persecution, personal hardship, and calamity.

Ezekiel is warned right up front that the people to whom he is sent are hard-hearted rebels who will not heed his message. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus finds himself in his hometown of Nazareth, preaching and teaching. But unfortunately, his familiarity in his hometown prevents the people from believing in him, so much so that the text tells us that Jesus is astonished at their unbelief, and can do no mighty miracles there.

But it is the apostle Paul's experience in our epistle lesson which draws our focus today, partly because I believe we can all identify with him so easily.

Let me try to help us understand Paul's story of being caught up into the "third heaven" by providing the context in which he tells this story.

The previous chapters of 2 Corinthians find Paul under heavy attack, and his status as an apostle challenged.

There were a group of men (one scholar calls them “super apostles”) who were gaining great influence in the church at Corinth by boasting in their own spiritual gifts and attacking Paul for his apparent lack of the same.

These men were gifted communicators and adept public speakers. Paul, on the other hand, was rather tactless, and was not a gifted public speaker. These critics wound Paul badly in chapter 10, when they refer to him as one whose “bodily presence is weak and whose speech is contemptible” (10:10).

As another example, these men appear to perform miracles and to have the gift of ecstatic utterance. Paul’s spiritual gifts, by contrast, are more mundane.

Further, these “super apostles” claim that the church owes them financial support because of their high-profile gifts and abilities. Paul, on the other hand, refuses to take money for preaching the Gospel, so that neither he nor his message can be bought or compromised. So, he keeps his full time job as a tentmaker, and supports himself while preaching.

Finally, these “super apostles” boast of “private revelations” which God has given them, using them as proof that their ministry and “apostleship” is superior to that of Paul.

In fact, for these critics, Paul is really a second-class apostle at best, a pseudo-apostle, an apostle “wanna be” who is really not qualified for ministry. Even a casual reading of 2 Corinthians reveals that their attacks hurt Paul badly. He is filled with indignation, and I would say it is of the “righteous” sort. And our text for today finds him answering his critics.

The approach Paul takes in answering his detractors can teach *us* a great deal about our own lives and our own discipleship. I offer a few lessons from Paul’s experience for us:

Lesson Number One: *Following Jesus is the best way, but it is not always the easiest way.*

Paul obviously didn’t want to deal with these difficult scoundrels, and he should not have had to. They maligned his integrity, questioned his motives, and hit him below the belt by attacking him personally. They hurt him badly.

And guess what? If you want to live as a Christian, there will be times when your integrity will be maligned, your motives will be questioned, and you will even be attacked personally. Many of you don’t need to talk about this in the future tense, because you’ve already experienced it.

I like what Paul does here. He says to his critics, “you talk about your private revelations from God, but I could brag you under the table when it comes

to such things. I have been given revelations from God that would knock your spiritual socks off.

But I'm not going to go there, because I'm more interested in *public ministry* than *private revelations*. I want people to judge me by the work and ministry I do in public for Christ and the Church. A true apostle should not be judged by how high you are carried away when you are taken up in the Spirit, but by what you do for others once your feet hit the ground.”

Do you hear what Paul is saying? He's saying that being a follower of Jesus is not about your pedigree, your natural abilities, your cleverness, or your good looks. Being a follower of Jesus is not about what you can offer God. The only thing we have to offer God is our brokenness. Being a follower of Jesus is about loving others in the way God has loved you. And the only qualification you need for that is your *availability*.

1 Lesson Number Two: *God doesn't always give us what we want, because what we want isn't always good for us.*

Paul says, “I was given a thorn in the flesh, and three times I asked God to remove it.” In all three cases, the answer Paul received was: “my gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness.”

In your walk with God, you will find that there will be times where God won't answer your prayers in the way you like, because what you think you want is not what is best for you. In times like that, you must learn the lesson that when

you face unanswered prayer, it may mean that God has a more compelling plan for your life than the plan you've been following.

As disciples, we soon learn that Jesus didn't come to earth just to make us happy. He came to make us like himself. God is more interested in the *production* of your character than the *provision* of your happiness.

Henry Mobley tells a story of growing up near Memphis, Tennessee in the early 1940's. He writes:

When I was a boy the most traveled road in our area ran between my hometown and Memphis. The road was built and paved in the late 30's. That area of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is perfectly flat, and the road ran in a straight level line for 35 miles... The first year on our modern road of the 30's, 19 people lost their lives.

[Lectionary Homiletics, 14:4, p. 45]

Can you guess the reason why so many were killed on that road? It's because it was perfectly straight, and people so easily fell asleep while driving on it.

As disciples, we may think that we want only smooth and uncluttered roads down which to travel, but the truth is that we will grow stronger when we are striving, when we are overcoming obstacles, when we are strengthening our spiritual muscles through overcoming adversity.

So the next time you face unanswered prayer or God doesn't work his plan according to your plan, ask yourself this question: "Am I praying to be free of all difficulty and hardship; or am I praying for discernment to see the greatness of God in my circumstances?"

Lesson Number Three: *What we consider our limitations, God sees as opportunities.*

Take, for instance, our personal inadequacies. Every one of us here has them, or we think we have them. But have you ever considered that what you see as a weakness, God sees as an opportunity?

Those areas of our lives where we feel weak or inadequate, God desires to apply his grace and turn that weakness into strength.

But our weaknesses are not merely opportunities for God. They are opportunities for us -- to depend fully on God, to trust God completely.

Christian disciples are not “super saints” -- persons who have pulled themselves up by the bootstraps of their own cleverness or natural ability. Christian disciples are fallible, broken human beings who become the instruments through which God shows his power and does his work in the world.

I think we can identify with Paul. Like him, we have all learned that following Jesus is the best way but not always the easiest way. We have learned from experience that God doesn't always give us what we want because what we want isn't always good for us. And we are learning that those things about ourselves that we don't like and consider weaknesses, God sees as opportunities for his grace to help us, and, in the process, help others.

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, let our only boasting be in the Lord. Let us come with thankful hearts to receive the grace he desires to give us. And let us rejoice that when we are weak, he is strong.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.