

7.7.2024 Pentecost 7

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Ezekiel 2:1-5; Psalm 123; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

“My grace is sufficient for you”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Over the past several weeks, we have been reading from Mark’s gospel about Jesus’ works of power and the faith of those whom Jesus healed. In these stories, as Jesus crossed boundaries to reach people in need of healing, reports about him probably also reached his hometown of Nazareth. On that Sabbath day the synagogue was probably filled with townspeople and family who had heard these reports and hoped to hear Jesus speak.

While Mark’s gospel doesn’t tell us what Jesus said that day in the synagogue, he does tell us that people were astounded, saying, “*Where did this man get all this?...What deeds of power are being done by his hands!*” Yet quickly, the hometown crowd began to express disbelief, saying, “*Is this not the carpenter?*” It seems they also remembered Jesus was the son of Mary – perhaps even poking one another and saying, “I know who he is – you know – the one whose birth wasn’t quite right.” Suddenly, acting as if they knew all about him, they rejected him.

This reaction reminds me that people continue to react in similar ways today. We can label people by vocation, family of origin, skin color and gender, by political affiliations and every sort of identity. In an instant, we can think we know all about them, and doing so, we can pass up an opportunity to get to know someone and hear their story. In doing so, we may even pass up Jesus standing among us in our neighbor. Part of the trouble is we’ve heard Jesus’ story so many times. Like the people that day, we may also think we know all about Jesus. Even today, as we label people and even dismiss them, we risk limiting the power of Jesus’ voice and hands in our midst.

Initially, the people of Nazareth got it right; they were astounded by Jesus’ teachings and works. Yet they let optics and perceptions of Jesus judge him, and Jesus could do no deed of power among them. Just verses earlier Jesus had said, “*Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace*” (Mk. 5:34),” yet now back in his hometown, Jesus was amazed at the unbelief of those closest to him. Blinded by their perceptions of Jesus, they never really encountered Jesus at all.

We are not much different today. Like his hometown, thinking that we know all there is to know about Jesus, we can have difficulty seeing Jesus. Daily, we may keep him tucked safely in heaven, far away from the needs of this world, forgetting that he lives raised and alive, walking the streets in our neighbor. We can forget that Jesus is alive, his kingdom always dwelling within us. We may

forget that we can know his power alive in us, power made perfect in our weakness.

Like those in the synagogue, the same might also be said of churches today. We can rely more upon theological traditions and intellectual perceptions rather than upon Christ's living power at work in his body the church. We can mistake time and eternity, mixing the things of this world and the things of Christ. We can forget that the church and its furnishings, our financial resources, and the beauty of our worship services, are meant to support God's mission of love for this world.

No deed of power is ever done in the church without Jesus. Through your hands and voices, this congregation witnesses to Jesus' continuing deeds of power. Jesus is alive in this place through ministries like the Soup Kitchen, Room In The Inn, and Kairos. He is alive in word and sacrament, in music that lifts us again and again out of our weakness, strengthening us to serve others. Jesus is God's eternity present within our time, present in our lives, present in our weakness. He lives to strengthen our weak hands and voices that we might lift and encourage others.

Yet easily we can forget this. Like those of Jesus' hometown, we worry about the optics and perceptions of society. Slipping into patterns of "cultural Christianity," we pay lip service to Jesus, without truly seeking to follow him. We can go along with a cultural Christianity that seeks to use Jesus in supporting the status quo, making sure that nothing ever really changes the worldly balance of power. Like those who said, "*Is this not the carpenter?*" – we can also demonize and reject the prophets whom Jesus continues to send to us. Churches can continue to reject him as he appears in different denominations, in different nations, in different ethnicities, genders, and identities. Thinking we know better; we listen to and follow other voices than Jesus' voice. Thinking we know better; we can take offense at Jesus' gospel of love for all people in this world God so loves.

Have you ever been rejected because of how you appeared to someone? Have you ever rejected someone without ever getting to know them? Has your voice ever been silenced because you dared to speak good news of love that challenged the status quo? Have you ever been amazed at the unbelief of a world that professes to know Jesus yet does not love one's neighbor?

It is into this world that Jesus continues to send his church each day. Like sending his disciples two by two with "*authority over the unclean spirits,*" daily, Jesus sends us into the world – a world that continues to be possessed by the unclean spirits of our own age – spirits of greed, hatred, partisanship, exclusion, nationalism, and racism. Like them, Jesus sends us into a world that still confuses the good news with the optics of success, money, and possessions. Jesus sends us not for our own glory or power, he sends us to reveal his power in our weakness and suffering.

Many years ago in Tokyo, I was in a meeting when the President of the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church remarked, “None of the churches that Paul began in the New Testament exist today. Churches exist within a place and time, among a people suffering so that God’s grace might appear through them.” This Lutheran pastor was revealing how churches are meant to struggle in their weakness by trusting that Christ is alive in them through grace and faith.

Like Paul’s words, “*for whenever I am weak, then I am strong,*” a healthy church knows Jesus by suffering alongside of him. A church that feeds the hungry, visits the sick, and unconditionally welcomes the stranger and the vulnerable, welcomes Jesus Christ in his weakness. In a world that bullies the weak, the church is Christ’s body when it bears the weakness of the world. Only the one who was rejected and pushed out of the world onto a cross can help us in our weakness so that strengthened we might lift others.

He calls you daily to a repentance that participates in God’s sufferings in a world that increasingly does not know God. He calls you to experience the *metanoia* of turning to him in your weakness – that you might turn away from the spirits of our own age and walk anew with him. He calls you to repentance so that forgiven, you might forgive others.

Jesus sends you again today with his grace and authority over the unclean spirits of our own age. How will you use his power made perfect in weakness to help others?

Jesus sends you again today to be his hands and voices in this world. How will you walk with Jesus and your neighbor today and tomorrow?

He calls you to life. His grace is sufficient for each day. Live into his grace. Amen.