

“Who Is This Man?” Mark 6: 1- 6 2 Corinthians 12: 9. Oct. 10, 21. @ Hope

The story of Jesus being rejected in his hometown is a classic. Many of us can identify with this experience. You know the old saying, *familiarity breeds contempt* . Our own families, our childhood companions, our next door neighbors often find it difficult to distinguish who we are from who we may seem to be. I vividly remember that many of my high school friends found it rather difficult to imagine the same guy that would occasionally get thrown out of Hi-School basketball games because of his hot temper was going to be a pastor. It just didn't seem to fit... Incongruent. I didn't think it fit very well either.

The royal family of England understands this dynamic, which is why they try to prevent too much detail about their lives from reaching the public. Queen Elizabeth calls the royal quest for privacy “ *not letting too much sunlight into the magic* “

So it is really not terribly surprising the people in Nazareth rejected the idea that the man they knew as a young carpenter was something so special. They thought they knew him... but what they knew didn't fit his claims or his popularity. Not surprising, but still a tragedy. They rejected their Savior because of presumed familiarity. They didn't think they needed what he offered. He got no respect.

The greater tragedy is that people continue to reject their Savior. The grace of God is shut out. Not because they know Jesus too well, but because they think they know what is best for themselves. And they find it difficult to acknowledge that they need what he offers. What gets in the way is self-esteem, pride, the presumption of knowledge, insight, the deception of intellect. **Here is the truth for the day... The road to spiritual wholeness is found by acknowledging our human weakness, our desperate need.** This, then, is the question we all have to ask ourselves. *Am I standing in the way of my own spiritual maturity? Am I putting obstacles in the path my spiritual development?*

Our culture encourages us to be filled with self confidence, to nurture our self esteem, to always put our best foot forward, and never, ever, allow others to see the chinks in our armor. Like the queen says, “***don't let too much sunlight into the magic***” Don't let people see the real you.

It should not come as a shock for us to be reminded that Saint Paul would not be favorably impressed with our culture. **Do you remember that wonderful passage on 2 Cor. 11 & 12.**where Paul parades his elevated spiritual experiences. He has had in visions and revelations, he knew a man caught up to the 3rd heaven, whatever that means. He speaks about his shipwrecks , his persecutions, his being hungry and cold and threatened by bandits and so on. On the surface it seems like bragging but he soon makes his point. He insists that the only thing worth boasting about is weakness, insults, hardships and difficulties... **For when he is weak, vulnerable, he is strong.**

He has a thorn in the flesh, some physical infirmity that he prayed and prayed might be removed, but the Lord said no. *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.* There is **something almost UN American not such a concept**. We have so much to be grateful for living in this country, incredible blessings that we experience every day..

remarkable freedoms gained by incredible cost to others... and unprecedented affluence. We are proud of who we are as Americans, as we ought be. But the downside is that we are so accustomed to be the biggest.. in having the best ..we can hardly comprehend the idea that other countries may do some things better than we. Boasting about our weakness? Focusing on our failures? Coming to grips with our inadequacy?our prejudices? That sounds downright unpatriotic.

But I digress..this isn't about countries and patriotism. What I'm saying is that **the culture we live in makes it very difficult for us to absorb the great spiritual truth that Paul is communicating.** Our culture despises weakness. Our world teaches us to conceal our vulnerabilities ...to camouflage our inadequacy's with self confidence and self assurance... It teaches that we can find the answers we need by self help, self discovery. I tell you, this is the wisdom of the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve. It is not the wisdom of God.

On several occasions I have had people who are new to Lutheran worship ask me, *“why do you people begin each worship service with the confession of sin. I know we are all sinners but do we really have to rub our noses in it Sunday after Sunday? Can't we be a little more positive and encouraging?”* I tell them that this is an **antidote to the culture** we live in... it's the way we get grounded again... to encourage us to stop believing the lies everybody tells us and the lies we keep telling ourselves. It's a dose of truth serum. And it puts us in a position to recognize Jesus when he comes to our town... to recognize Jesus when he steps into our lives to say, ***your sins are forgiven! Go, and sin no more!***

The good people of Nazareth couldn't see Jesus because they were in the wrong posture, the wrong position. They were standing up. They needed to be kneeling. They needed to be confessing. They needed to acknowledge their weakness and their desperate need for a Savior.

Can we allow the people of Nazareth to teach us how to bring depth and maturity to our spiritual journey? To meditate on these lessons is to remove obstacles from the path of our spiritual development. There **are two points of application that come to mind:**

- A) Each of us find moments in our lives when the burdens are so heavy that we find it difficult to see brightness and hope. Paul is not the only one with a thorn in the flesh. Many of us have prayed fervently for relief from our thorns, seemingly in vain.

One of the insights gained from pastoral ministry is the awareness that every family, **I mean every family,** has burdens, losses, fears and anxieties. When we are in the depths we sometimes imagine that life is coming up roses for all our friends and neighbors while the thorns and weeds are only in our home. This is only because most of us keep our burdens and fears to ourselves, stiff upper lip and all that... *don't let too much sunlight into the magic.* This kind of pretense is helpful to no one.

When our burdens are so heavy that we are afraid we will break, that's the time to remember that God's strength and power come to us in our weakness. We can never see him so clearly or hear his words of comfort and assurance so powerfully as when we are nearly broken...when we know that our own resources are totally inadequate. As someone has said it so well, *“When nothing is left but God, that's when you find out that God is all you need.”*

As I like to tell people in hospital beds, “*The upside of this experience is that when you are flat on your back, you can only look up...and that’s where you will find strength and comfort.*” To be clear, **I would never suggest that a personal tragedy or crisis is a blessing..a blessing in disguise.** No, these life crushing burdens are not blessings. Paul says that his thorn was a message from Satan. So are our thorns. But they can nonetheless become channels by which we are drawn closer to our Lord, who is ultimately our only hope and consolation. This is the way Paul got the most out of his thorn in the flesh. It opened his ear to the Lord's word, *my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.*

B) **the other thing** which I'd like you to think about is how **important this principle is in our personal family dynamics.** There is nothing more destructive in the relationship of husbands and wives, parents and children than prideful resistance to honesty and confession. Relationships stumble and fall because people find it so difficult to say, “*I was wrong. I failed. I am weak.*” Humility and personal honesty are the building blocks of successful relationships. Why? Because you just can't trust someone who is incapable of revealing and confessing their weaknesses...who live behind a façade. Instinctively you know that they are dishonest and a fraud. Thus, the paradox becomes true even at a human and social level. Strength is made perfect in weakness. Wholeness is the product of acknowledging our brokenness. And **what is true at a human and social level is profoundly more true in our relationship with God.** This is because we can lay ourselves open, totally vulnerable, totally honest, totally broken. And he says, my grace is sufficient for you! That grace is **personified in Jesus** Christ who covers all our failures and faults, all our weaknesses and makes us new creatures, perfect in the sight of God. We are redeemed, restored, forgiven, Indeed, when we are weak we are strong.

I'll **close with a little poem** written well over a hundred years ago, supposedly by an aged confederate soldier.

I asked for health that I might do great things;

I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy;

I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;

I was given weakness that I might feel the need for God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;

I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing I asked for, but everything I hoped for.

Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am among all men most richly blessed.

Indeed, among all of humanity we are most richly blessed. Immersed in the precious freedoms of this country, but more and especially in the freedom and wholeness that is ours in Christ Jesus.

LORD, MAKE US WEAK, SO THAT WE CAN BE STRONG. AMEN