

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 8, 2018 Proper 9

All Saints Church
Year B

Ezekiel 2:1-5
Psalm 123

2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable unto you dear Lord. Amen

Some of my most memorable experiences while traveling have been found off the beaten trail- be it with Bedouins over a campfire in the Egyptian desert, shamans in the Zulu villages of South Africa, olive farmers in Sicily or deep in the Old City of Jerusalem, with Jews offering me a coffee rather than selling me their goods.

In all of these occasions, I'm at the mercy of others. I'm usually lost, often afraid of snakes and unrecognizable food, not sure how to act, or what to expect, deeply dependent on how ever I got there, and in the hands of my hosts. It's more than curiosity that gets me into these situations- indeed I am seeking to know and feel, to cross over to "the other side" of experiencing lives I have no way of understanding except by simply being there.

Yet, something else has motivated me, and it has something to do with our gospel passage this morning where Jesus sends out his disciples, two by two, ordering them to take nothing for their journey except a staff, "no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, with only sandals on, and no extra tunic." I know that experience of traveling and feeling stripped down to bare bone basics- in these situations my education, my privilege, my cleverness, my abundance do me no good.

And despite Jesus' call for his disciples to teach, I don't think I was ever the teacher in these situations, yet, they have all made me a better teacher and priest. It has something to do with being put into a situation, where one's faith and life must lean on hospitality, differences, the present moment, grace, advocacy, and trust. All great teachers.

One occasion, when my car broke down on the side of the road, two Sicilian men, with broken English, picked me up and rather than take me to my teaching job, they proposed an adventure- to see their work place, to have a picnic, to meet their friends and families- *to play*. I insisted that I needed to get to work and finally they complied to my wishes. That night when I was sharing with two of my Sicilian colleagues, Western educated, about the experience, Umberto shook his head,

"You Americans just don't get it. How many days are you going to work in your life? Too many to count. Why would you ever pass up the grace of a gift of a day like today, and for what? Yet, you all do. You're all so predictable, rational, earnest, and slaves to productivity. We Sicilians think this way of life is.... barbaric."

And with that he handed me a cigarette as a peace offering.

What a wake-up call. I was 23 years old, and I could feel a shift in my body that was both terrifying and exciting. Umberto's challenge changed my life and opened me up to opportunities, to paraphrase Jesus, of "traveling light."

One message that I have heard from my hosts, over and over again, especially when I am as far away from secular dominance as I can get, is a critique, often said with love and respect. To summarize:

In the name of progress, efficiency, clarity, being #1 in the world, you Westerners have reduced religion and matters of the spirit, to a mere melodious tinkling somewhere in the background of "happening." Your words, your power, your dominance, your strength don't rely on "the Word"- which is so much more about mystery, joy, grief, loss, silence, waiting, and need, rather than your articulate words. For you, it's all about being right, getting it right, and having control.

And then there's always a sigh.

Frankly, I think it's a fair challenge. Paul is right in the middle of this challenge this morning. Don't let anyone tell you that the Bible is antiquated, a book of the past. To be a sacred text, it needs to speak fully to us today as it did thousands of years ago. And it does!

Paul is defending his apostleship. After leaving Corinth, other teachers arrive, challenging his leadership. Paul sarcastically calls them "super apostles." Paul thinks he is going to encounter a theological argument with them, but he doesn't. Rather, what these "super apostles" are claiming is that *their* religious, esoteric, revelatory, spiritual experiences of being "caught up to the third heaven" are better than Paul's. They claim to know God better, to understand God's mysteries more fully, and to be in stronger control of the religious life. They are boasting, confident, and a real threat.

And Paul's response: "Yeah, I've had those experiences, but they have not led me to bragging about them, but rather to humility. And just in case I didn't get it, I was given a thorn in the flesh to remind me of my vulnerability, of my failings, of my need, that God's grace is sufficient, and that God's power is perfected in weakness. Paul is confident- since the power of God was at work in the weakness of the crucified Christ, that same power will work through his own weaknesses.

There has been much speculation about what in the world was Paul's "thorn." I love the fact that he never tells us, which allows us more easily to ask, "what is our thorn?"

I think within the debate that our country is in right now, in all the strife, division, ugliness, fear, our answer, though tempting, is not to boast about our "solutions" or our way out of it. Our natural inclination. It's part of our American DNA.

Rather we need to ask as a nation a very religious question: “What is our thorn in our flesh, put there to remind us that God’s grace is sufficient, that wherever we are weak, then we are strong because it is the power of God at work and not us.”

I am not going to speculate about the thorn- it’s a question for all of us, but I do think it has something to do with the chasm between the haves and the have nots, a conflict as old as who we are as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. Will we respond, not out of our elation of power and efficiency of pulling the darn thing (thorn) out, but rather by trusting that all we hold in weakness, by gathering it all up, naming it, letting it reveal its wisdom to us, we will be made strong by the light of God’s grace and power.

Last week, as you know, I was with my extended family on the occasion of my sister’s ordination as deacon. We, like many American families, represent all sides of the political spectrum. We don’t talk politics. Yet, we are trying to listen to each other’s lives more carefully. Not easy to do. Loving each other helps.

My cousin was deployed in Iraq twice as part of the Seabees, a division of the Navy that fixes things like bridges, power equipment, and tanks. My cousin is an amazing mechanic and engineer and politically we don’t see eye to eye. We were talking about matter of the spirits, and he talked about the threat of enemy raids in Iraq and the automatic response of gas masks and covering and heading to an underground tunnel for safety. He hardly ever talks about the war. I leaned in.

“When the announcement comes over the intercom, that it’s not a drill but the real thing, we all dress in our gear in silence, and then 2x2 we move outside to reach the underground protection. This one time, I was last to leave, and I hear over the loudspeaker my commander say, ‘Cotter you need to find a missing mouthpiece as you come over.’ I could hear my buddy freaking out inside the tunnel, sure he was going to die without the essential covering over his mouth. I stood up, well aware of the sand storm, the danger, the fear, and then (and he had me stand up and put a blanket over me) I felt this blanket drape over me as real as you feel this blanket now.

“And it wasn’t as if I was being told that I would be safe- that wasn’t the experience. It was just this powerful understanding of being held in life and death. I was as if I was stripped of every piece of gear, and I only had God’s blanket, and it was perfect.”

Jesus and Paul are preaching to us the good news of God’s blanket, and it’s radical, frightening, doesn’t make logical sense, and we can’t domesticate it so that it only becomes a mere melodious tinkling somewhere in the background of “happening.”

Somehow, we need to find the way of trusting that in our stripping, in our trusting, in our weakness, we are made strong by the sufficiency of God’s grace within us all. And it is then, we can become teachers of the good news of Christ crucified. AMEN