

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, 2015  
The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett  
St, James' Church, Mt, Airy MD

It is tempting, this Sunday, to skip the disturbing gospel lesson and the bizarre rhetoric of Paul's letter to the Corinthians and focus on the simple story of the establishment of David as king over all of Israel and Judah in the first reading.

There are resonances between David's choice of Jerusalem as his capitol – a place not under the control of the north or the south – and the founding of our nearby national capitol city.

But it is hard to leave readings as strange as the second one or as challenging as the gospel unremarked. And since, by coincidence, these two readings have an important central message in common, I'm going to tackle them both.

Now Paul's rhetoric may be confusing, but his message is pretty straightforward.

All of that "I know a guy..." language wasn't meant to fool anyone. The Corinthians knew full well he was talking about himself. And what he's doing is having a smackdown with some members of the Christian community in Corinth who claim that through visions and mystical experiences they have been given special, secret knowledge of Jesus and of God's purpose. And they seem to have been claiming special privileges because of their special knowledge.

All of Paul's peculiar language about boasting is his way of reminding them that he has had his own mystical encounter with Jesus, on the road to Damascus, and

that his encounter with Jesus trumps theirs. If anyone is entitled to special status it is Paul, but he states that those kinds of experiences, whether his or theirs, do not give you special privileges, either with the community or with God.

In fact, and keep this in mind as we move on to the gospel lesson, seeking power or privilege is a sign that you are not in tune with God. The Lord says to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” In other words, your own power and privilege (and we all have some of each) can prevent the power of God from working through you.

Now in today’s gospel lesson, as I mentioned last Sunday, Jesus finds his own power to help, to heal, and to teach inhibited in his own home town by a community whose members do not have faith in him. Jesus offers those words about a prophet not being without honor except in his own town, family, and house that are so comforting when we find that our parents still treat us like children, or that our friends are resistant or even hostile to our sincere attempts to grow and change to explain his difficulty.

But despite Jesus’ frustrating experience trying to help those who have known him the longest but do not, it seems, know him very well, Jesus sends his twelve friends out to do the same thing Jesus has been doing – to teach, to heal, and to proclaim the reign of God.

And he tells them that they must go and do this with little more than the clothes they are wearing. And one has to wonder, “Why?” Would it be such a terrible thing to set out for a day of preaching, healing, and casting out demons with a little lunchbox? A credit card in case you don’t find someone to take you in for the night? A flashlight? An umbrella? A cell phone? Why this insistence that the disciples take nothing with them, not even the dust on their sandals as they move from place to place?

But remember those words of the Lord to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

It is possible that showing up with nothing was meant to be a way of showing solidarity with those you came to help; that it might increase their receptivity to your message. But the account of Jesus’ reception in his old ‘hood argues against that. Jesus showed up with nothing and still could do nothing.

And that suggests that Jesus’ “no bag/no carry-on” limit on the disciples is for their own benefit. Relying on nothing but the power of God means the disciples aren’t depending on their own resources, their charisma, good looks, nice clothes, and fancy cars, or their business cards that connect them to respected and powerful interests to get people’s attention. All they have is the grace of God. And that grace, absent the disciples’ own claims to power and authority, is sufficient, and more than sufficient.

So, do the disciples learn the lesson Jesus is teaching them? Not exactly. Before the summer is over, we will hear plenty of examples from the rest of Mark's gospel of Jesus' followers doubting whether what God has provided is enough, of being astonished when the Lord does provide, and of being fearful for their security and their lives.

Indeed, it is only Jesus' resurrection that begins to impress upon them the breadth and depth and soaring reach of God's grace, and it is in the light of resurrection that they remember the experience of being sent forth with nothing, and begin to understand Jesus' wisdom.

And people of faith still need to make that journey, still need to be sent forth with nothing but the grace of God. We see that in the community at Corinth, where the stories of Jesus and of God's grace were captivating, but were not enough to transform them into wise and egoless believers. They required not stories of grace but experiences of grace to be transformed.

And that, I think, is the most important message these two readings have for us as well. It is not that we all need to set out without backpack or wallet to preach the word of God to strangers (although I'm sure that's an experience that would do many of us a world of good), but we are all called and challenged to examine the ways that the things that give us a sense of safety, strength, and security – our names, our family connections, our worldly goods, our professions, our

reputations, our personal style and talents and skills and special training – the way that all these things blind us to our dependence on God, and worse, inhibit the grace of God.

For when we rely on our stuff, our skills, and our selves, we can become stingy with all of those things, hoarding them as if they were our own possessions. And of course it is not possible to lay down your talents, strengths, skills, wisdom, and experiences when you go into the world and encounter the stranger. But if you understand that they are not your possessions, but the grace of God made manifest in you, and meant to be given freely to the world, then you carry them lightly – they are your traveling companions and not your load – and you leave a bit of them behind, like the dust from your sandals, when you move on.

For you see, God's grace *is* sufficient. It goes with you wherever you go. It, and not your stuff or your skills or your connections, is the source and definition of your worth as a person. The grace of God is the source and definition of any ability you have to help, to heal, and to share the good news about God in Jesus.

The grace of God is always with you, no matter what other stuff you are carrying on the journey. But sometimes we need to set down the other stuff in order to see it.

Amen.