

“God’s Grace is Sufficient”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 8, 2018

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Holy Scriptures: Mark 6: 1-13 & 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

Mark 6: 1-13

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded.

They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So, they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows--was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am

content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Taking One for the Team

God said to Paul, *"My grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness.
My grace is all you need.
My grace is sufficient, it is satisfactory,
it will be ample for your needs,
and when people gaze at you they will see my power."*

Taking One for the Team

Sound familiar?

Seen or heard the term?

It's the kind of attitude on sacrifice for a cause we saw on t-shirts
during the Peachtree Road Race last Wednesday morning,
though maybe not on the happy couple dressed as Oompa Loompas.

One quick moment struck my funny bone during the Peachtree Road Race. A runner zipped past me while talking on her phone.

The zipping by me part wasn't really funny;
that's a fairly common happening.

(By the way, after July 1, is it legal in GA to use your cell phone while passing joggers?)

Anyway, she was attempting to help someone to pick her out,
to identify her among the crowded field of 60,000 participants.

I looked around us to behold a 6-point-2-mile-long line of people in motion,
southbound on Peachtree Road, bound for Piedmont Park,
the majority of whom were proudly sporting our nation's colors,
decked out head-to-toe in red, white and blue.

"You can't miss me," she said into her phone. *"I'm wearing red, white and blue."*

I still wonder how that worked out for her.

Taking One for the Team

Sounds like common vernacular gleaned from a quip by Knute Rockne or Bobby Cox
rather than the Apostle Paul or Teresa of Avila or Max Lucado.

Yet all of these folks knew a thing or two about sacrifice for the greater good.

Paul, the roving evangelist and church planter,
learned about sacrifice and service above self
from the life and witness of Jesus the Christ,
as did our spiritual ancestors and guides.

We see in Mark's Gospel that the Messiah was sent by God
"to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.
On the Sabbath Jesus began to teach in the synagogue,
and many who heard him were astounded.
They said, "Where did this man get all this?
What is this wisdom that has been given to him?
What deeds of power are being done by his hands!
...Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?"
And they took offense at him.
Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor,
except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."
And he could do no deed of power there,
except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them."

Jesus of Nazareth went out from there to serve the people of God
to heal, to help, to exemplify the power of Love,
knowing that most likely He would be rejected,
that some people would take offense.
And then, despite being rejected by some folks in Nazareth,
Jesus called people to go forth in the name of God.
"He called the twelve
and began to send them out two by two
and gave them authority over the unclean spirits."

"God [thought] nothing of commandeering ordinary folk
and giving them outrageous assignments." [William Willimon]

The call by God was clear:

The call to serve was not based on their ability but rather their availability.

The call was to be practiced as a team, serving side-by-side.

The call was based in building relationships with God and God's people.

The mission of their teamwork was clear as well:

Their witness was divinely inspired and empowered,

transformative, cosmic, even,

a vocation of grace, grounded in Love.

Taking One for the Team

Sometimes I think we make ministry way more complicated than it really is.

Ministry is about relationships.

God's grace is the greatest tool, the primary tool, the finest tool Christ provides.

Annie Lamott wrote in Traveling Mercies, *"It's funny.*

I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had
some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools:

*the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of
patience.*
But then when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools
– friendship, prayer, conscience, honesty –
and life said, ‘Do the best you can with these, they will have to do.’
And mostly, against all odds, they’re enough.”

All the tools our Team needs are already at our disposal:
the grace of God,
gracious hands that reach out to help,
our own capacity and availability to serve in the name of Love.

Jesus sent out His disciples with a shepherd’s staff and some anointing oil to serve and offer the grace of God in the name of Love.

He sent them out knowing full well
they’d experience incredible joys and small victories in God’s name,
as well as rejections akin to what Jesus uncovered,
possibly encountering the same negativity or fear or shunning.

Still, He sent them forth, confident in their work and play and courage.

He sent them to serve in the community
regardless of their theological pedigree or biblical degrees,
levels of faith or bouts with doubt,
dark nights of the soul or bright mornings of hope.

He looked down the road as He prayerfully awaited their return.

Taking One for the Team

Right about now is when the Word may become a hard word to hear,
to listen to, to receive.

This may be a Word that you and I may need to indirectly overhear,
and in due time, like a gentle early morning mist upon a field,
the Word of the Lord soaks in to water the soil of the soul.

The answers we least want to hear are no, not yet, never, nothing.
When we’re told no, we feel or think we’ve been discarded. Rejected. Disrespected.
Cast out, cast aside, cast off.

When told no, told never, told nothing at all,
we may feel or think we’re being ignored, repelled, discouraged.

Who here has been down this road, the long, winding road of rejection?
Who hasn’t?!

Every mortal has borne such pain,
and – let’s be real here -- every mortal has dished it out.

We may try to forget, to forge new memories, yet this is easier said than done,

It doesn't take much to bring back the sting of wounds
of a job not offered,
a friendship cut short,
a loving hand extended but not accepted.
Somehow, somehow we move on;
we muddle through and reach the next day;
we grab the next rung on the ladder, turn the landing on the stair,
catch our breath, step out on faith, re-learn to trust, again.

My mother firmly believes that whenever life closes a door
God opens a window.
Her life and ours are living testaments of this truth.
Are you like me, not having enough fingers and toes to count the number of times
a rejection has, in the long run, turned out to be a blessing,
a blessing in disguise?

Pick up the Bible and flip to any section
and you will read of rejection and frailty and human weakness,
stories of closed doors and challenges encountered.
You will also encounter our spiritual predecessors
who made do with what life handed them,
drawing deeply upon the mercy and comfort of God.
Chapter after chapter, passages and psalms guide and enlighten us
to discern that God's grace is enough, it is sufficient to see us through anything,
and in our weakness and mortality God's power is made perfect.

*"God loves to look at us,
and loves it when we will look back at God,"* said Kathleen Norris.
*"And when we are rejected or dejected,
and when we reject one another,
and when we reject or deny God,
God will find us, and bless us,
even when we feel most alone,
unsure if we will survive the
night
or the experience or whatever trial is before us."*
(Kathleen Norris, paraphrase from Amazing Grace, p. 150)

And maybe, my friends, that is a key reason for worship:
Worship is our utmost, ultimate response to the amazing grace of God.
We praise God, not to celebrate our own faith,
but to give thanks for the faith God has in us.
To let ourselves look at God, and let God look back at us.
And to laugh, and sing, and be delighted

because God has called us God's own..." and suspends us in the grip of grace.

Taking One for the Team

When Jesus at last saw his disciples again,

He welcomed them home, rejoicing in their sacrificial service.

We can relate to what his disciples felt.

When we return to Christ for renewal and repurposing,

our hearts skip a beat each time He says to us:

"I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning [!]

See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions,

and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.

Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you,

but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10: 17-20)

"In other words, this ministry is much more than helping people,

more even than healing and preaching." [William Willimon]

Ministry in the name of Jesus is transformational, miraculous, cosmic.

"God is taking back the whole cosmos through our work." [William Willimon]

Taking One for the Team

God thinks nothing of commandeering servants

to carry forth God's outrageous assignment.

"We've all heard it said that hurt people hurt people.

But I believe a greater truth: healed people heal people."

Wounded healers: be healed so you may heal.

May you become a balm of healing & wholeness for a fragmented world.

"The fact is hurt people hurt people.

Often, they are spreading their hurt to people around them

who have nothing to do with the problem.

Their hurt is, in their minds, to be shared with others,

even if others aren't interested in it.

We can't always fix the problems of people who hate on us,

but we can do something.

While it is true hurt people hurt people,

it is also true healed people heal people.

The good in your life can be shared just as easily as the negative

and your story of healing might be a balm in someone else's hurting soul.

If you are being attacked,

try to discern the hurt in the person's life.

*You may never find the answer, but I can guarantee you it's there.
And in the meantime, share a little healing with someone.
Your healing may be what they need
to overcome the hurt others are bringing in their life.
Hurt people hurt people, but you can choose to bring healing.”*
(Dr. Brent Taylor, Website Blog, 2013)

Taking One for the Team

“The closer one approaches to God,” said Teresa of Ávila, “the simpler one becomes.”

Draw closer to God.
Approach the Holy.
Reach out for relationship, for release, for restoration, for rescue,
whether for yourself or in sacrificial love for someone in need.
Most every rescue is a two-way street.
One hand reaches out for help, another extends hope.
Such an exchange of grace, of love in action,
is rarely as complicated as we make it out to be.

Ministry is about relationships.
God seeks a relationship with you.
Seek one with God and one another.
God's love in action is the foundation of healthy and healing relationships.
God's grace is ample for our needs, personally, as a Team, as the Body of Christ.

Max Lucado describes the sufficiency of God's grace this way:

Imagine we are all passengers on an airplane.
Suddenly the pilot rushes out of the cockpit.
The pilot exclaims, “We're going to crash! We have to bail out!
Here, there are enough parachutes for everyone!”
The first passenger makes a request. “Any way I can get a pink one?”
The pilot shakes his head in disbelief.
“Isn't it enough that I gave you a parachute at all?”
So, then the first passenger takes it and jumps.
The second asks, “Any way you can keep me from getting airsick as I fall?”
“No, but I can ensure that you will have a parachute while you fall.”
One after another every passenger asks for goggles, or boots,
or to wait for later, or to change the plans,
or to overcome a fear of falling.
“You people don't understand,” says the pilot.
“I have given you a parachute; that is enough!”
Only one item is necessary for the jump, and it is provided.

God places the only strategic tool necessary right into our hands.
God's gift of grace is adequate; it is sufficient.

But are we content?

No, says Max Lucado, we are anxious, restless, even demanding.

Yet God loves us so much that God gives us a nudge, a tool,
and suspends us in the grip of grace.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!