

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

The Wisdom of the Un-Welcomed

With the temperature reaching record highs a few weeks ago, I decided to make a new commitment – I decided to move all of my attempts at exercise indoors! Part of my reasoning is to avoid the summer heat, and part of my reasoning is due to my love/hate relationship with running. At times in my life I would have called myself an avid runner, but no matter my commitment level I've always had a love/hate relationship with running. Running isn't always fun or easy. Running can be pretty physically demanding.

And, like most things in life, when you get out of a healthy groove, it gets harder and harder to bring yourself back in line. The same might be said about getting motivated to make it to church, ordering salads instead of burgers, or making an effort to get home early enough to put the kids to bed even when there are deadlines looming. When you get out of a healthy groove, it's hard to get back into the habits that are life-giving.

Still, even when I am on a running kick I know I need some extra motivation to make it up Decatur hills and to push through to next stop sign. To get that extra push I use a trick I read about years ago– repeat words of encouragement to yourself! Find a thought or a saying that gets you through. I've used several over the years...

Impossible is nothing. Impossible is nothing.

No pain, no gain. No pain, no gain.

Time to get stronger. Time to get stronger

- Which is ironic b/c these are said when my body's getting weaker and weaker...

Such sayings often change my mindset and help me push on. Whether our challenge is small and fleeting like running up a hill or life-altering and relentless – we often need words of encouragement to focus on and keep us going.

Paul was one who used words of encouragement to keep the church at Corinth going through an identity crisis of sorts. Paul is heavily invested in the church at Corinth– he founded this church and spent a decent amount of time there working to build it up. Paul actually sent Timothy to intervene when their teaching became exclusive rather than inclusive. Paul continued to write the disciples at Corinth sending four or more letters. Paul may have visited them following the letter of 2nd Corinthians to ensure this church and his teachings continued to thrive.

Paul was invested in Corinth. You might even say it became like a second home to him through multiple travels and quite a bit of lively letter-writing. It was a place that was clearly close to his heart, which was why he told this personal account of a thorn in his side. And when a place becomes our second home, it can be tough to go back and see what has changed. Paul faced it with Corinth and I wonder if Jesus may have faced it when preaching in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth.

Going home can be challenging in ways we can never anticipate. We may notice old landmarks are no more. A favorite restaurant that just couldn't keep up has closed and a Subway has opened in its place. The storefront of a neighborhood hardware store stands empty a few years after Wal-mart moved in. There's a highway running through areas where you used to ride your bike.

When you go home or if you are home, maybe you're faced with scars of the past – an old rejection by your parents, a hellfire sermon from your home church preacher, or the pain of being picked on in school as an adolescent.

Yes, going home can be a challenge, especially when you've grown up. In Mark, Jesus went home after performing a number of miracles. Jesus returned to Nazareth to continue preaching words of wisdom and carrying out deeds of power. He was initially welcomed into the synagogue by the religious leaders, who would allow him to speak. But he brought words of wisdom that transcended his place in the community and deeds of power that were far more threatening than the typical works of a craftsman's hands. The Gospel of Mark tells us that the people were "astounded" at his words of wisdom and deeds of power.

Can you hear the voices of rejection in this passage?

"Look, the carpenter's son has grown up."

"How on earth could the son of Mary leave the woodshop, disappear into the woods and suddenly begin teaching with all this wisdom?"

"I heard he got caught up in that John the Baptist cult!"

"I heard he spent 40 days in the wilderness! Who in their right mind..."

"How could this Jesus we saw in swaddling clothes say and do such things?"

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“I knew he might be trouble when he stayed in Jerusalem as a twelve-year-old. His parents were worried sick! And now, here he is running his mouth about repentance, justice and grace...”

Due to his wisdom and power, Jesus has now become the un-welcomed one. He was one who had a message and a physical ministry that challenged much of what was being taught in the synagogue.

And, Mark uses this as a transitional passage from a series of miracles – works of power into a section that tells of more and more estrangement.

For Mark’s audience the message of Jesus arrives with wisdom and in power – through Jesus’ words and actions. And it is this wisdom and this power that leads to Jesus being someone allowed to teach in the synagogue to being the un-welcomed.

In Mark’s gospel there is a tension regarding who is in and out – in and out of the power circles and in and out of the Kingdom. This transitional point in Mark’s gospel points toward the coming chapters, which affirm that the work of those called by God will take place in all regions. And after Jesus is driven out of the synagogue, he sends out his disciples.

And the funny thing is he tells these disciples to go into the villages with just the clothes on their back – these same disciples he’s already asked to drop their jobs and family to hit the road for God. With so little to rely on in terms of comfort, the disciples are sent out with a ministry founded on repentance, healing and wholeness. It is a ministry founded on being a witness for God’s sufficient grace.

If you’ve ever been on a mission trip, you probably know what it means to leave your comforts behind. From 2006 to 2009 I went on eight mission trips to the Gulf Coast to serve with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, or PDA, in Pearlinton, MS and Houma, LA. I know some of you traveled to these same places in the past. *Let me give a disclaimer - going on a 21st century service trip is vastly different from going on a 1st century journey into unknown villages where your life may be threatened.* Still, the one constant is the challenge of leaving comforts behind. The packing list never includes all that you wish it would, and in the case of PDA you may be asked to sleep in a plastic pod with A/C that may or may not work in the sweltering Mississippi summer. You’re asked to leave comforts behind – I’m sure those of you who have been to Haiti have experienced this feeling as well.

This feeling of leaving comfort behind can be frustrating at first, but ultimately the lack of comfort, the hard work, the sticky heat make you realize how reliant we need to be on

God's sufficient grace. You can see it in the laughter and tears of people who have lost it all, the year of service many young adults give to work in such places, and in the reminder that God's grace is still at work to bring healing and wholeness in our world.

It's important to be reminded of God's sufficient grace. The disciples and Paul are examples of what it means to rely on God's grace. In our individual and communal reliance on God's grace is the testament on which our faith and our church stand. My friend Phyllis Melvin is an example of someone who relied on God in ways that are a testament to the sufficiency of God's grace despite suffering.

Phyllis was a church member who stood out in the pews because she always wore a hat a bulky overcoat in church, even during the summer. Children would ask, "Why does that lady wear a hat in church?"

"Shhh, don't ask that," I would hear parents say, worrying that their children might offend Phyllis or make her feel unwelcome at church.

My friend Phyllis wore a hat in church because of the skin cancer that had left her extremely sensitive to light. She wasn't going to take any chances, even indoors. Several years ago Phyllis's skin cancer and pending eye surgery left her challenged... and searching... and asking questions of God. Her suffering was real – it was physical and it was painful.

Phyllis liked to tell the story of a defining moment of questioning in her small apartment. She said, "So, I'm walking from the bed to the couch, back and forth... and I thought, 'Dear God, please give me a mission.'" She wasn't asking for a miraculous end to her pain. She was asking for a clear sense of calling in her life.

That night, Phyllis found a mission. Her mission was inspired by a man on TV. He said that if a person were to put a dime in three piggy banks each day, they would become a millionaire in no time. You can do the math on the man's promise of wealth, but Phyllis was sold on the idea.

She knew she wouldn't be able to collect three dimes a day, but she felt she could collect one dime every day. Phyllis saw this as a sign from God to begin collecting dimes. The man on TV challenged viewers to collect dimes with the motivation of amassing wealth. But Phyllis longed for a mission from God, so she began collecting dimes for the hungry. My friend Phyllis had the desire to seek out God's call to serve despite her own suffering and pain. Phyllis went on to inspire her church and businesses in her neighborhood to collect dimes to feed the hungry in Columbia, SC. She also served hands on at Harvest Hope

Food Bank, taking on tasks like folding bags and other tasks where she could sit down because it was simply too painful to stand and sort cans in the food bank.

One thing that always stood out about my friend, Phyllis, was her humility when the media caught wind of her story. The interview requests began around the time the Dimes for Hunger movement she started reached the \$5,000 mark. She didn't ask to be the 'good news' feature following the 5 o'clock weather report. She didn't ask for the attention – in fact she shied away from it.

Phyllis died in February, just days before the Dimes for Hunger program would surpass the \$10,000 mark. Her legacy lives on in a number of churches that collect dimes in their Sunday School classes and Welcome Centers. Every dollar and every dime collected has gone to Harvest Hope Food Bank, which estimates the donations have provided more than 70,000 meals.

Phyllis was inspiring to me in her service and her witness to God's grace prevailing despite one's suffering. She would often encourage me to go to seminary and loved to hear how I was doing once I got here, sending emails on an old desktop donated to her by church members because she couldn't afford her own. Phyllis no doubt faced suffering each day, but she stands as a witness echoing Paul's encouragement that God's grace is sufficient.

What difficulties have altered your life?

And how has God's grace carried you through brokenness to wholeness to being a witness, even when being a witness may mean you aren't always comfortable or welcomed?

How is God's sufficient grace carrying you today? Share that story. It's one worth telling.

In the name of God our Creator, Jesus Christ our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit our sustainer. Amen
