

Sexagesima

19 February 2017

2 Corinthians 11:19-31

St. Luke 8:4-15

A Sermon by the Rev. Dennis Washburn, Ph.D.

The Gospel for today is the Parable of the Sower. It is both well-known and very meaningful. The parable stresses spreading the Word of God, the message of the kingdom, and allowing it to grow. God's Word is powerful and transformative like good seed. And yet, this Word does not grow and produce results in every situation. It needs good soil that is properly prepared and maintained.

I have preached on this parable about God's Word here in the past, and the adult Sunday school class looked at it last Sunday. So today I've decided that it would be appropriate to focus on the epistle selection from 2 Corinthians 11.

In 2 Corinthians 11, St. Paul is responding to Jewish Christian preachers who dispute his understanding of the Christian message; they want a more legalistic approach. They also stress their own wisdom. They have accused Paul of being weak, unworthy, and unwise, and a number of members of the church at Corinth seem to have accepted their views.

So St. Paul responds with a little sarcasm about their wisdom, and he gives examples of his own weakness and foolishness for the sake of the Gospel. He had not been an early disciple. Instead, he had been a persecutor of the Christian faith. Furthermore, he doesn't view himself as a gifted speaker, an impressive physical presence, or

naturally strong. He has endured many natural and man-made problems during his ministry.

Ironically, it is through his weakness that Paul has been allowed and enabled to spread the message of Christ. Divine grace has used him and his weakness to witness to the way of the Cross. He concludes, "If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities." (2 Cor. 11:30)

This is similar to the point that St. Paul makes in Galatians 6:14, "But God forbid that I glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

The entire earthly life and ministry of Jesus Christ point to the Cross. Although other themes such as Incarnation and Resurrection are very important, the Cross is central and gives these other themes their true meaning. The eternal Word, God the Son, became incarnate in order to bear the Cross. And the risen Lord is always the same one who was crucified. In a similar way, St. Paul's apostleship reflects the Cross of Christ. Divine grace can and does bring faith and redemption, but grace brings faith and redemption in spite of and through human frailty.

This is the message of the whole New Testament. It is the Gospel or "good news." Only Jesus Christ has any real merit and any true power. And on earth, even Jesus shows His merit and His power primarily through humility, service, and sacrifice.

Unlike Christ, neither St. Paul nor any other saint has any personal merit. At their best, even the greatest saints are frail earthly vessels who accept Jesus Christ and allow His grace, manifested most pointedly on the Cross, to flow through them and use their human frailty.

This Scriptural principle was at the heart of the Reformation, and it is reflected in Anglican reforms of the liturgy. Our official prayer books have honored the examples of the saints but have not appealed to their merits- not even to the great deeds of Peter and Paul.

All of this is about more than St. Paul or other dedicated saints of the past; it is about the calling of every member of Christ's universal Church. We must strive to be open to grace, to be faithful, and to follow Christ every single day. We witness to Christ in word and deed. We spread His message and build up His kingdom in the world. Like Paul, all of us are missionaries in one way or another.

Yet, even at our best moments, we have no merit of our own; we can only reflect Christ's merits. We are weak and fallible. Compared to divine glory, our greatest works are meager. So we must not glory in our small human accomplishments.

Even the finest buildings, growing congregations, impressive programs, beautiful art and music, sound theology, charitable deeds, and so on are not for our personal glory. They are only valuable to the extent that they are both inspired by the Cross of Christ and point us and others back to His Cross in faith.

The world may view the centrality of the Cross as foolishness. The worldly tendencies which remain in every human mind and heart still hesitate to accept the wisdom of the way of the Cross. Nevertheless, in the divine economy, the foolishness of the Cross is the only true wisdom. Strength through Christ-like weakness is ultimately stronger and wiser than the greatest worldly power and wisdom.

During Pre-Lent, Lent, and indeed every day, we are asked to look to the Cross of Jesus Christ. Christ is Victor, but only through the Cross. How much more that is true of all who would follow Him!

We are asked to do many things and endure many things for Christ and His Gospel. In word and action, we seek to witness to His saving grace and power. However, we remain weak vessels. We have no greatness of our own. As Christ Himself teaches us in St. Luke 17:10 (ESV), "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

And so we must never glory in our wisdom, strength or work for the Lord. Rather, like St. Paul, if we glory, we glory in our infirmities which can be used by God for His purposes. In other words, we can only glory in the Cross of Jesus Christ at work in our lives. We glory in our crucified and risen Lord by whom the world is crucified to us and us to the world.