

I mentioned in last week's sermon that, while I feel joy as we regather, I am also feeling a certain kind of grief and sadness. I grieve because I know the church is not going to be what it was pre-Covid. This is proving true across the board for churches of all denominations, not just us. As we begin the process of regathering, I am fully aware that the post-Covid church is going to be different. And, quite frankly, this change can be seen as a bad thing or a good thing. This can be seen as a real opportunity for the church. Just maybe, all the challenges the church now faces present a real **opportunity** for the church to be reborn, reshaped and made new. Just maybe, God is calling for faith communities to become truly **prophetic**, to **proclaim** and **live** the gospel good news in fresh and innovative ways! If that is the case, we need to be open to the change, and ready and willing to face the same challenges all prophets throughout time have faced. And, as always, today's readings are life-giving for us in this present moment because they speak of three "prophets" – Ezekiel, Paul, and Jesus. All three of these men were called to stand up on their feet, prophetically call the people to faithfulness, speak truth to power and privilege, speak a word of warning, speak a word of comfort, and proclaim the good news that God's life-giving power is breaking in and present in

this world. And, as has happened to all prophets throughout time, all three of these figures faced elements of significant rejection.

In today's first reading, we hear Ezekiel's call story. God literally picks Ezekiel up off the ground where he has fallen prostrate because he knows his own unworthiness before God. God then prepares him to speak God's message to the people of Israel. That preparation includes warning Ezekiel about rejection as God says, *"I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.' Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them."* One commentator summarizes the Ezekiel reading this way:

*Perhaps the people will listen, but perhaps they will not. Ezekiel has the task of speaking the truth without regard to the response.... Authentic ministry speaks the truth regardless of response. God calls us to faithfulness and obedience, not success.*

*Yes, faithfulness and obedience, not success.* These are simple guidelines, but...they are so counter-cultural for us because we live in a highly success driven culture. Success is our society's proof of value, and failure is only forgiven after the fact, that is *if* we can turn it into a life lesson that empowers our eventual success. Every system in which we function elevates winners, and judges everyone else. We judge people caught in poverty, we judge the uneducated, those struggling with disabilities or addictions, the unpretty, the unloved. Our success-addicted culture tells us

that, if we cannot rise above and find a way from rags to riches, we are not worth much. And, friends, it's not just secular culture that communicates this message. The church has also bought into this idolatry of success and power. Ever since the 4th Century, when Emperor Constantine decided to use Christianity as a unifying tool in his empire-building, the golden calf of Christendom has seduced the religion of Christ-followers with the offer and prospect of power. Over 1600 years have taught us to see power, success, influence, and large gatherings of people as the marks of blessing on our ministries, and – conversely – to see any diminishment of Christianity's central place of privilege as persecution. However, friends, **followers of Christ, disciples of Jesus, were never promised power! We were never promised favored treatment. We were never promised success.**

No, we were told that God **chooses** to be known in **weakness**. That what we need is NOT success, but rather **grace**. Because, as Paul tells us today in our second reading, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Corinthians 12:9) This is the weakness of sometimes having our witness rejected. This is the weakness of the one we follow, this Jesus, the one who hung on a **cross**. But, it is in that place of supposed *weakness* where we truly find the GRACE of God. Friends, God is not interested in our **success** because **chasing success is the**

**opposite of grace.** Success is depending on ourselves to prove our own worth. **Grace is about knowing that our worth comes always and only from God.** Grace is **not** about power, or acclaim, or increasing numbers of people, or “winning” in any of the ways we are taught to think about success. Grace is about knowing the One to whom we **belong** and receiving the gift of faith that makes God our only benchmark.

This message comes through loud and clear in our gospel reading for today. The second part of our gospel reading tells us about Jesus sending the disciples out on their first mission assignment to spread the good news.

His instructions are very unusual:

*Don't take anything with you – not extra clothes, not food, not money... just a walking stick (because you'll be doing a lot of walking). You will have to depend on the hospitality of strangers. But don't take anything that's not freely given. Some people are going to reject you. They will refuse to take you in or to listen to what you have to say. When that happens, just shake the dust from your feet and move on.*

These instructions are NOT very encouraging for beginning disciples! And, they sound even worse when you consider that they have just witnessed Jesus' first “failure.” They sound even worse because the first half of our reading tells us how Jesus, after all the crowd-drawing success in his travels around Galilee, is **rejected** in his hometown. The people there admit to his amazing deeds of power and his authoritative words of

wisdom... but none of this really matters. They **know** Jesus' humble beginnings and they get offended by his claims to power and authority. And because their hearts are hard, Jesus cannot do much there. Except for a few healings, he faces major rejection. And it is after THIS rejection that Jesus decides to send his disciples on a mission to experience some rejection for themselves. I must ask, do any of us who are so focused on success and numbers, see this as a prescription for success and growing the church? Do we see this as making any sense? Probably not.

When Jesus sent the disciples on their mission, they were to proclaim a message of repentance. The Greek word for repent in this passage is *metanoeo*, which literally means “to change one’s mind, to turn around.” This was the message Jesus proclaimed as well. He called the people to repent and believe – to change their minds and trust in the gospel of love and grace – the good news of God’s forgiveness and love. And, with that message in mind, it makes PERFECT sense that Jesus would tell the disciples to go without provision and expect some rejection. You see, they could not preach repentance if they didn’t change their minds first – change their minds about what success looks like. They needed to know the grace that is **not** about power, or acclaim, growth in numbers, or “winning” in any of the ways we are used to thinking about success. Grace is about knowing

the One to whom we belong. Grace is about receiving the faith that is all gift, the grace that makes God the only criterion we need. The disciples' mission is **not** about success. It's all about grace. It's about understanding and knowing our true identity as a beloved child of God.

As we begin to regather while facing challenge, we are **not** competing in this world's system for measuring success. That's **not** our frame of reference. Our identity and our values are grounded in God's **grace**. We are loved, and we are called. That's what it means to be a Christian – a disciple of Christ. We are loved by a God who does **not** require us to be successful according to worldly standards, because our worth has never been about what WE do – it has always been about **God's choice** to show us grace. It is about God's decision to love us while we still were sinners, and to call us to be part of God's work in this world, with full knowledge that we will sometimes fail. What we are **called to do** is share God's **GRACE**. Like prophets of old, we are called to stand up on our feet, call the people to faithfulness, speak truth to power and privilege, speak a word of warning, speak a word of comfort, and proclaim the good news that God's life-giving love is breaking in and present in this world and in people's lives. And, yes, we might face rejection. It happened to Jesus, so chances are it will happen to us. But, that also makes us faithful disciples.