

The Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

July 9, 2006

Ezekiel 2:1-5

Psalm 123

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have a thought about grace. We talk about God's grace a lot. I suppose in the past I have tended to see grace as something very individual and specific, and perhaps it is. But I can also see grace as a universal, something that is always there everywhere, and we live in the midst of it. Perhaps we just don't recognize it until something remarkable, something wonderful happens. Then we say, "Aha! Grace."

But if that's so, why on earth don't we know it? How can we miss it? The answer to that, I suppose, is we simply need someone to point it out and focus our minds on the presence of God. So we need two things: we need a speaker totally committed to expressing God's grace, and we need hearers with open and receptive ears.

What messes it all up? Just so, speakers and hearers. There are, and this may shock you, those who are prideful in their role; glib persons whose personal opinions and agendas intrude on and filter their expression of God's grace. It's not new. Paul obviously knows a few of them. Paul is actually grateful that something prevents him from becoming too comfortable, too polished in his preaching and teaching.

Some “thorn” keeps Paul uncomfortable. What is it? He never explains. All sorts of things have been suggested through the years. So, I’ll add my theory to the list. I think Paul was subject to crises of confidence and, perhaps, some sort of panic attacks in confronting people. I think that’s why Paul is so assertive and rigid in his writing as opposed to his speaking. We really don’t know what sort of speaker Paul was; no one really tells us. Although, perhaps the story of the young man falling asleep and falling out a window while listening to Paul might give us a clue.

That’s just my theory, but, if it’s correct, it tells us that Paul’s great influence came not from his “great learning” and his oratory but from expressing his own unpolished, sincere, powerful, personal experience. That’s what they remembered. That’s what we remember.

Paul and Ezekiel have a lot in common. Paul experienced the presence of Jesus on the road to Damascus. Ezekiel experienced the presence of Jahweh on the Chebar River in Babylon. Both were life-changing moments; both men were empowered to go and tell the world about God, to speak the words that God gave them. Neither of them was a professional prophet, and they knew it. They were agents of God and no more. There is no room for egos and agendas in such people. Whether the world listens or not, the Word is to be proclaimed.

Did people listen? I doubt that it was much different for Ezekiel or Paul than it is today. Some hear; some don’t. Surely not everyone on Paul’s and Ezekiel’s journeys was spiritually blind or deaf. No more than today. Some listened, heard, and believed. Otherwise, we would not be here today.

And then, Jesus. We could say that Jesus encounters God on the bank of the Jordan, a voice from Heaven saying to Him, “You are my Son.” Jesus is empowered, as Ezekiel was and Paul will be, to speak God’s word. He, too, speaks to a world or at least a synagogue that will not hear. They don’t trust Him. That probably tells us that they

have experienced those self-serving prophets that Paul will know. They can't see past Jesus to hear His message.

All of which is to say what? Well, I think it tells us that we have a task. I think it tells us that we must be open to hear the word but be ever mindful and discerning of the slightest misuse of the Word for any reason whatsoever.

We have to pay attention. We have to listen attentively. We have to recognize and feel God's grace.

In His Holy Name.