

Lectionary 14 + July 8, 2018

Ezekiel does not have an enviable task. When God sends him to be God's prophet, it is made clear that he will be preaching to a rebellious people. Their fidelity to God has been less than stellar. So, who knows whether the people of God will hear the prophet's message or refuse to hear? The important thing is that they shall know that a prophet has been among them. Ezekiel's charge is to be faithful, not successful.

Jesus says as much to the disciples when he sends them out, two by two, to spread the power of the Gospel. The results are out of their hands. Some will accept. Some will reject. And should they meet with resistance, Jesus advises the disciples to register a non-violent protest – shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.

Jesus knows of what he speaks. Jesus surely impressed many people, but his deeds of power were also met with resistance and downright rejection, even in his hometown congregation. At first, the people were thrilled with him but once they recognized him as the guy who grew up in their neighborhood, their attitude shifted almost immediately.

So, Jesus could do very little in that place. In Nazareth, there wasn't much in the way of results.

It should not come to us as a surprise. Mark's Gospel reveals a resistance that grows over the course of the Gospel narrative, and by the time we get to Jerusalem, Jesus is headed for failure. The rejection among the people in his hometown foreshadows the cross.

To be entrusted with this Gospel message doesn't guarantee success either. Jesus and Jesus' message isn't the most popular word around. It is, in fact, an alien word, especially in a world enamored with results and success.

Achieving results is our "bread and butter." Most of us wouldn't get a paycheck otherwise. Please understand - it is good to use our gifts to their fullest in service to neighbor and, I think it is good to strive for excellence. The difficulty comes, I think, when we get too invested in results or outcomes, and then that becomes our identity. With achieving as our goal, we get caught up in the notion that our self-worth is based on how much we produce or how well we succeed. We may find ourselves becoming attached or too attached or overly attached to the results we want.

During my first call, I became friends with a Nazarene pastor just down the street from the congregation I served. His church had made plans for a new building. Over time, the dream seemed to dissipate. My friend, however, could never let go of his dream to build a new church. He talked about it in every sermon and just about every conversation he had with parishioners and colleagues. The dream never came to pass and sadly, I saw my friend suffer under crushing disappointment.

Stories like this are legion. A similar scenario would occur more than once in my ministry.

In one of those scenarios, I felt I had reached a dead-end where what I said or tried to achieve was not being received in the place I served. I shared these feelings with my spiritual director who said something I'll never forget, and the principles he shared have been permanently etched in my brain and on my heart.

This was his advice:

1. Show up
2. Pay attention
3. Speak your truth
4. Let go of the results

In other words, be faithful in the work God has entrusted to you, be present to the people God has placed in your life, speak what you know to be true, and let go of the outcome, or, maybe better said, "don't be overinvested in the results."

1. Show up
2. Pay attention
3. Speak your truth (God's truth)
4. Don't be overinvested in the results

Pinning our hope on results may find us obsessing over them even if the hoped-for results are noble and good and filled with the things of God.

During the Vietnam War, a young Christian joined thousands of others in protest of the war. This young man reached a point for disillusionment. He was especially discouraged by the lack of energy for opposing the war within his church and its leadership. He felt his message was falling on deaf ears. He wrote a letter to his friend and mentor, the celebrated mystic and contemplative Thomas Merton. Merton's reply is well known. It's called "A Letter to a Young Activist." Here's some of what he wrote:

Do not depend on the hope of results ... concentrate, not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. The big results are not in your hands nor mine, but they suddenly happen, and we can share in them; but there is no point in building our lives on this personal satisfaction ... all the good you do will come not from you but from the fact that you have allowed yourself, in the obedience of faith, to be used by God's love. Think of this more and gradually you will be free from the need to prove yourself, and you will be more open to the power working through you without your knowing it. If you can be free from the domination of causes and just serve Christ's truth, you will be able to do more and be less crushed by the inevitable disappointments. The real hope then is not in something we think we can do but in God who is making something good out of it in ways we cannot see.

Friends in Christ, God calls you and God sends you to use your gifts in the places you work, in your involvement here at PRLC, in your vocation as parents and spouses and siblings, in your friendships, and in the world of the neighbor and God sends you, in the spirit of Christ, to live in freedom. It's the freedom to use our gifts to love others for no other purpose than to love them. To speak, in word and action, the truth of the Gospel, leaving the results to God. We are free to shun an obsessive overinvestment in our plans and designs and free to exercise a healthy and holy detachment. This helps us abandon a spirituality that is based in perfection, for we are free to be and to love as we are loved.

St. Paul even went so far as to say boast, not in your success or accomplishments, but boast in your weakness, especially when we are lured into what Luther called the "presumption of self-righteousness." Paul wouldn't even mention his ecstatic spiritual experience but chose instead to boast of his hardships, suffering and failings pointing not to a power of his own making, but the power of Christ. This power of God is made perfect in weakness.

Today we install PRLC Council members who begin their term of office this month. At the 8:30 liturgy they are installed at the Sending. At the 10:00 service, the installation occurs at the Gathering. That way, they can be present for both services without having to be present for both services in their entirety like some of us! I like this arrangement, most of all, because it is an instance where our shared signs and symbols say more than one thing.

At the font we gather again and again for we are summoned by Christ and we remember, again, who we truly are and from the font we are sent by Christ into the world of the neighbor.

At this bath we have received our charge. When we were anointed with the sacred oil and signed with the cross, God set us apart to serve, and when we presented with the light of Christ, God sent us to let it shine before others.

Just as the council members will be commissioned for a task today, know, too, that you are commissioned and sent, all of you, all of us, every week. Sent to bear God's healing word to the entire world and maybe, occasionally, we should just say something like "Go in peace and don't get overinvested in the results."

The mere fact that God placed the sign of the cross on our brows makes us unique. Christians, you see, bear a sign of failure, especially in a world enamored with glory and winning. We bear witness to a different word, a different reality, a very different kind of narrative. But we bear it in joy because in raising Jesus from the dead, God looked upon the way Jesus lived and the way he died, and God said, "This is good!"

This is the way of love. God has placed that sign on our brows and God breathes God's Spirit within us to share this power. It is true power, and it is the life-giving power that saves and will save.

We are free to serve and bear witness and to remember, along with St. Paul, that God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

God's grace. It is sufficient. It is enough. It is all truly need. Amen.