

2 Corinthians 12:2-10 Bill Uetrict 7.2.24 7 Pentecost

Many of you are old enough to remember the comedian, Rodney Dangerfield. A sometimes crass, politically incorrect, and often bombastic comedian, he gave us the famous “I-get-no-respect” monologue. Many, including me, have quoted him ever since. “I just get no respect.”

Our worship and music ministry felt that that is an apt theme for today in light of our readings. Ezekiel, the prophet, is demanding respect, asking that his people respond to the word that he says comes from God, while realizing that they often don’t “give him and God no respect.” They are a stubborn people, he says. They have a history of not respecting the word of God.

In the gospel reading for today, Jesus is facing lack of respect in his own hometown. This guy is one of us, the hometown folks are saying. Heck, we know his sisters and his brothers. He is a working-class guy. Who does he think he is, doing all these powerful deeds? You shouldn’t get above your raisin’, after all. The Bible tells us that they took offense at him, that they were “scandalized” by him. And Jesus was amazed at their disbelief.

As one who had a sister who often got perturbed with me when I, in leading in church, would speak words of challenge, I understand what Jesus is saying today. You’re my little brother, and you are speaking with such authority? Come on, that’s not right. “I just got no respect!”

And while the story of the lack of respect for Jesus in his hometown resonates with me, it is Paul’s experience with lack of respect that is grabbing my attention today. If you want to understand Paul’s writings, you need to grasp that many of them come as defense of his ministry, a response to the lack of respect that he is feeling. This is especially true in Second Corinthians. What is our text for today is a

part of a larger defense of Paul against his opponents, opponents who are really ticking Paul off. These opponents are sometimes referred to as “super apostles.” They are leaders who are smooth, who look good, who speak well. They are getting lots of attention as good-looking, smooth-talking people often do.

It’s quite apparent that Paul may not be that good of a speaker. He may not be good looking. Maybe he’s awkward. We don’t know for sure. But we do know that whatever his challenges are they are causing a public relations problem for him. He’s coming across as weak, and the people of Corinth, a metropolitan city inundated with images of power, preoccupied with wealth and strength, are dismissing him and his authority.

Those of us who went to Greece traveled to the ruins of Corinth. We saw the remains of buildings that were erected to celebrate the cult of power. In Corinth, you could find temples dedicated to Apollo, Aphrodite, Zeus, Athena, and later on, beyond Paul’s time, to some of the Roman emperors. The Corinthians loved power. They loved beauty. They also loved highfalutin spiritual experiences. Found among the Corinthian Christian community was a group of folks enamored with praying in heavenly languages, glossolalia, we call it, speaking in tongues. For these Corinthians, Christianity was about spiritual highs, about traveling to the spiritual never-never lands, a reality, by the way, that is not unfamiliar to the modern church. There are loads of Christians these days who go from church to church, experience to experience, to achieve spiritual highs.

To people who are seekers of highs, preoccupied with the wonderful, the best, the most beautiful, the most powerful, Paul tells his own spiritual high story; “I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body I do not know. And I know that such a person was caught up into paradise

and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”

It’s as if Paul is saying, “You who seek high after high, I’ve had my own high. It’s probably higher than any high you’ve ever known. I was told things that human beings would not be able to share because they are so high and lofty. I could brag about that to you, and about that one, who is me, by the way, but I am not going to, even though I just did. I could brag about me and my experiences, but I am not going to. I am going to brag about my weaknesses. My experience was exceptional, but life isn’t about the exceptional. I am going to tell you about the unexceptional, my thorn in my flesh.”

“I asked God to get rid of that thorn—three times. And he didn’t remove it. I think he didn’t want me to get too elated about life, too happy. Paul sounds like a Minnesota Lutheran here, a resident of Garrison Keillor’s “Lake Wobegon.” There you didn’t want to get too happy about anything, too joyous. The other shoe could fall at any time. So, you are just better off remaining somewhat sedate. You won’t experience such a big letdown. I don’t think this is Paul’s intention. His aim is to point us to his humanity. The thorn, whatever it is, keeps him grounded.

I get Paul. I really do. There are some things about my life, about my body that I just want to go away. If this would go away and if that would go away, life would be perfect. I would look perfect. I would come across perfect. But there are thorns in our sides, pains in our butts. And they just won’t go away. Sometimes other people don’t notice them. But we do. Sometimes other people wish they had your thorns in their sides, not theirs. But we have ours, and they stick with us. They won’t go away. And they bring us down.

The COVID that I had to deal with this past week was a real thorn in my side. Not only did I feel bad, it got in the way of what I wanted to

do, what I needed to do for my job. But more than that, it messed with my view of myself. I don't get sick. I exercise. I eat right. In my 28 years of ministry here, I missed three or four days of work because of sickness. Even when I fell off my bike and damaged my body badly, I presided at a wedding the next day. Thorns in the side? I overcome them. I am victorious. Really? Bill, you are part of the human race.

Bill Loader says of Paul's thorn in the side: "It keeps him from thinking he can succeed in building his own personal Tower of Babel to achieve and sustain his worth." There's the point. We think that our worth comes from us, comes from our performance, comes from our victories, our achievements. But Paul has a different view, a different focus.

For Paul, worth comes not as an accomplishment, but as a gift. For Paul, the focus is not power and strength. The focus is Jesus Christ and him crucified. For Paul, to understand who God is, you need to look at the crucified Jesus. For him, the God of the universe doesn't look like the gods of the Greeks or the Romans. He looks like a suffering man hanging on a cross. God looks like compassionate, suffering love, not controlling power, which is why we need not spurn our weaknesses, why we need not run from our humanity, why Paul's opponents should not simply look at outward appearances or his speaking abilities to determine if they will receive his ministry, why they shouldn't give him no respect. Those super apostles may look good, may be smooth talkers, but they are not revealing who God really is. So, Paul does the amazing thing of rejoicing in his weaknesses.

"Three times I appealed to the Lord about the thorns in my side, my weaknesses, but he said to me: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships,

persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Wow! This is a world turned upside down. We don't have to walk around pretending that we don't have weaknesses. We don't always have to look good. Life isn't about displaying some kind of perfection to others that they just envy and feel that they can't emulate. God is discovered in the depths of real life, life that is filled with weakness and suffering. The games are over. Ya! Bring your strengths. We need them. But don't run from your weaknesses. Offer them. For truly, whenever you are weak, then you are strong.