

**Ezekiel 2:1-5**

2:1 He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you.

2:2 And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me.

2:3 He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day.

2:4 The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD."

2:5 Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

**Mark 6:1-13**

6:1 He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.

6:2 On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!

6:3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

6:4 Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

6:5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.

6:6 And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

6:7 He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.

6:8 He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts;

6:9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.

6:10 He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.

6:11 If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake

off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

6:12 So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.

6:13 They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

### **Proclamation of the Word**

Real letters from children to their pastor:

*Dear Pastor, I think a lot more people would come to your church if you moved it to Disneyland. Loreen. Age 9. Tacoma*

*Dear Pastor, I liked your sermon on Sunday. Especially when it was finished. Ralph, Age 11, Akron<sup>i</sup>*

### ***After giving a sermon***

*The Baptist preacher just finished his sermon for the day and proceeded toward the back of the church for his usual greetings and handshaking as the congregation left the church. After shaking a few adult hands he came upon the seven year old son of one of the Deacons of the church.*

*"Good morning, Jonathan," the preacher said as he reached out to shake Jonathan's hand.*

*As he was doing so he felt something in the palm of Jonathan's hand. "What's this?" the preacher asked.*

*"Money," said Jonathan with a big smile on his face, "It's for you!"*

*"I don't want to take your money, Jonathan," the preacher answered.*

*"I want you to have it," said Jonathan. After a short pause Jonathan continued, "My daddy says you're the poorest preacher we ever had and I want to help you."*

As Rodney Dangerfield used to say, "I get no respect!" That is probably how Jesus felt that day when he went to his home synagogue and discussed Scripture. At first they were impressed with Jesus. "Such wisdom! What deeds of power have been done!" But almost immediately the naysayers and critics began, "Isn't that Mary's boy? He's just a carpenter's son." They belittle him. They took offense at him, and Jesus was rendered powerless Mark tells us. A prophet is not welcome in his hometown.

Most prophets are not welcome among us either. Prophets tell us things we usually do not want to hear. In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet tells the hard truth. The Lord states that they do not hear because they are rebellious, not seeking or trusting God.

But let's back up a moment. Jesus was rendered powerless Mark records. Did you catch that? Their criticism, their belittling, and lack of faith rendered Jesus powerless. And these were good church folk, the faithful. That makes me wonder, does the church not experience the power of Jesus to heal, to teach, to cast out demons because of good church folks who don't want to receive Him?

Cynicism, nay-saying, and general snarky-ness is at an all time high, and not just in the church. We seem to have lost our sense of civility without regard for how our words and attitudes affect others. Just ask SC legislators how many threatening emails and letters they have received this week concerning the flag. One news article had one of our local legislators asking, "What happened to civility?" Sometimes church folks behave the same way lacking respect, grace, and hospitality in word and deed. I know that may be surprising to some of us.

Does the church not experience the power of Jesus to heal, to teach, to cast out demons because of we good church folk don't want to receive Him. What happened when the people would not receive Jesus? He left. Moved on. Amazed at their unbelief. And then he sent his disciples to people who needed the good news of God's love and grace in the form of healing and exorcism.

Need. The gospel was always visited upon people in need. This week I had multiple conversations about affluence and need. Being the church in an affluent culture is challenging. Most of us have no needs. We have all we need and excess of what we need. Earlier this week, one man I was talking with said, "I am done with stuff." This man has done well in life, but knows there is more to life than stuff. He serves twice a week at the Children's home serving as a mentor to a young boy. He is generous with his money and his time. He possesses the gift of hospitality. He has found joy in simplicity and faith.

In another conversation that same day, a local pastor and I were saying we have never served churches where people have the means for so much leisure and travel. He said,

"One of our families just spent a month in Italy then came back to head to their family beach house. They are not a regular part of the church family because they have so many options and because of wealth." Churches are not made up of folks like farmers like it was a couple of generations ago. A church member in my last church, Hall grew up on a dairy farm. He is about 50 years old. Reflecting on how life has changed, he said his family never went on vacation because the cows have to be milked seven days a week. Kids did not play organized sports until High School and then not on weekends. Gathering on Sunday at church was your family time, your community time, a day of rest and worship. Tony Campolo has a study with entitled "Affluenza" which our Seekers class has studied.

*"Affluenza" Definition: The American epidemic of shopping, overwork, debt and the pursuit of money. The term was coined by Jesse H. O'Neill, a psychotherapist specializing in wealth-related issues, and a nationally-recognized authority on the psychology of affluence.<sup>ii</sup>*

When some bemoan the lack of involvement and commitment in the church today, one factor is our affluence. I learned this week that the church in China has been growing and thriving since 1979 when Christianity became legal, but as of late the church is experiencing a lack of growth. Church growth has reached a plateau. According to the Chinese Christian living here who was discussing this phenomenon stated one reason: the economy is strong and the people are becoming more affluent. On the other hand, the Church is thriving and growing the third world in places where there is much need where people know they must depend on one another and God. In the U.S. the "blue collar" type churches are growing and thriving while mainline churches are in decline. Perhaps the message of the Kingdom of God is just not compelling. A kingdom of broken, the weak, the needy, the hungry, the oppressed just doesn't sell especially to those who have built their own kingdoms of comfort. I speak as one among us, not outside of privilege.

Maybe one reason the members of Jesus' synagogue did not listen to him was that they had no need for Him or His message. That rendered Jesus powerless. So Jesus sent his disciples into the world to meet the needs of others who really did need the good news.

Jesus strips away the comforts and tells his disciples to be completely dependent. Even street preachers of that day would have taken a bag, a couple of extra shirts, and a staff. Jesus' disciples take even less. They will be totally dependent on the hospitality of strangers. Stripped away. Or as Eugene Peterson paraphrase in *The Message*, "Don't think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. *You* are the equipment." (Mark 6:8-9) You are the equipment God needs.

It was sort of an Outward Bound program. Outward Bound for teens is a way to be totally dependent on nature and yourself as you are taken into the wilderness. The difference is that the disciples are sent out two by two. They depend on one another, strangers, and God daily for provision. It is through their weakness that God's power is most evident.

I think one reason mission trips are so fulfilling for those of us who are comfortable, we see God's hand at work and abundant life among the poorest and neediest who live everyday by the Providence of God and in the care of community. We are stripped away, traveling light, open to the Holy Spirit in a different way on these trips. I must admit one reason I am going to Guatemala this fall is because I so desperately need to be reminded of the Kingdom of God at work. There is so much clutter to cut through in my world. I need to be in touch with that abundant life that Jesus talks about. I have found the deepest spiritual meaning while serving among the poor, the needy. I hope the young people leaving today to serve in Charlotte through Myers Park Presbyterian church will catch glimpses of the kingdom and feel the presence of God as they serve together in Christ's name.

Maybe if I am being really honest, another reason I need to long to be on a mission trip is because so many people want to consume church, shop church, or turn the church into an attraction like Disneyland like that little girl wrote to her pastor. Instead, Christ calls us to be interdependent, to serve, to share generously, to welcome, and to come needy to the Lord of life to Jesus for provision and strength.

Last week I came out as a recovering racist hungry for redemption and reconciliation.

This week I come as one hungry for grace, for true community, for the gospel. Perhaps you are hungry, too.

I think that is why the nation has taken notice of the response the Emanuel A.M.E. church members and families after the recent massacre of the faithful saints who gathered to study God's word. Ones who received welcome of Christ, welcomed a stranger into their sanctuary. Their response could only be possible by people who are so knit together by God's grace in their own life together that they could offer grace, forgiveness, and see the possibility for good coming out of tragedy. It is also because of their deep and abiding trust in God's justice that they commended the killer into God's hands. Instead of living in fear, they live in faith. That is refreshing, invigorating, redeeming. While the world looks at their response as extraordinary, my guess is that this is not out of the ordinary behavior. It was crafted through sharing trials, joys, suffering, and need as a faith community. The good news of Jesus Christ shines brightest in places of deepest need. God's power is shown in our weakness.

In today's reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of God's power at work in weakness.

The Lord said to Paul

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."*

Paul writes: *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.*<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus calls us to examine our own ideas of power and use of it. As ones who have been offered grace, how can we use our power to be gracious, extend healing, and cast out demons that plague our communities? We are the ones Jesus is sending out into the world to proclaim the good news, to heal, to cast out demons whether those demon are prejudice and hate, greed and consumption, or lack of care for the poor and needy.

Can we lay down our lives so others might know that grace? It begins with showing and receiving hospitality as those first missionaries did.

To experience the kind of hospitality that Jesus has in mind is to experience the love of our God -- so deep, so wide, so huge; the love of our God which shows mercy no matter what; the love of our God which became flesh so that the doors of the divine heart might be flung open to all.

As ones who have known such hospitality that Christ offers, we are called to extend hospitality to our neighbors. Let's do so relying on the power of Christ at work within us. To do any less is to render Jesus powerless. To do any less is a lack of faith.

You are the equipment that God uses to do his work. Go boldly in that promise.

Laura Smith Conrad  
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.ahajokes.com/reg26.html>

<sup>ii</sup> [http://shop.umc.org/OnlineResources/pdf\\_resources/CuringAffluenza.pdf](http://shop.umc.org/OnlineResources/pdf_resources/CuringAffluenza.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9-10