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Propers 9 (Pentecost 7) Series B 2018

Phillip L. Brandt
Concordia University - Portland, pbrandt@cu-portland.edu

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Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – July 8 (Proper 9)

It is really an awesome thing to ascend into a pulpit, face a congregation, and preach. If you don't feel a little trepidation mixed with the joy of that, I think you probably ought not to be up there. It isn't that you are worried about what they will think. But what will He think of this?

Peter tells us that we are handling holy things, the things of God, when we preach. Paul tells us that faith comes by hearing. There is a fearful and wonderful thing that happens in the proclamation of the Word and in every facet of a ministry, actually. God is present and He is doing his work.

But we are almost hardwired for a series of questions in the face of that reality, many of which are responses born of our fear, a fear rooted in our inadequacy. Am I really up to do that holy work? Surely my sin precludes my participation this task. And even if I believe that Jesus has dealt fully and wholly with my sin, surely that does not make me competent. There is a reason I did not go into sales, there is a reason I am not some multi-millionaire, and there is a reason that I have not started my own company and risen to the top of my field, or garnered the highest honors. I am simply not so great at this. I am an average sort of guy. Hollywood is not beckoning me for stardom and there is a reason for that. My jokes are usually pretty lame, my singing is often more than a little off key. I would be laughed off the stage by Simon Cowell's acerbic wit if I dreamed of appearing on American Idol or another of the annoying copycat shows which have sprung up.

Jesus sends me to be part of saving the world? Does this call into question His wisdom and omniscience? Did he really mean me? Doesn't he know that not even my high school classmates thought I would succeed? And these were my friends. He wants me to be an emissary to people I don't know? He wants me to bring this message to people, all of them, any of them?

Now perhaps you are already finding inside my comments above a number of things to which you object. Jesus has not sent me to the whole world, perhaps the scope of my ministry needs to be scaled back a little bit, but in truth, if you shrink it down to one person, even a person I love, even my own child, it might get a little less bad, but it still doesn't get to be good. I could no more instill faith in a single human being than I can make them taller, change the color of their eyes, or give them a beautiful voice. At best I could help them fake it, platform shoes, contact lenses, and let them lip sync to some real singer. But it would simply be fakery. Indeed, when I think about this and put a single face on my ministry, a child, a neighbor, a spouse, a friend, it almost gets to be more terrifying. Jesus you want me to make a difference in his or her life? I am not even sure that I can make a difference in my own life.

Our readings today include the call of Ezekiel, the call of Paul, and Jesus sending out the twelve. All three of them, but especially Mark can be read today to address our inadequacy, our fear of inadequacy. The message is not the pep talk you might think it is, that you really are better than you think and that you can do it all. No, the word is much more realistic than that. The kingdom of God works as much through our failure and lack of success as it does through our competency

and skill. God is strange that way. Even Jesus had a bad day when his words drove away people (John 6) and when his own family tried to put him in a mental institution.

Collect of the Day

O God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy, grant us the fullness of your grace that we may be called to repentance and made partakers of Your heavenly treasures; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Your and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God's power is made known chiefly in showing mercy. Think about that for a moment before you rush off to the next part of the prayer. God does not demonstrate his power in squashing the sinner as he deserves, but by not reacting to the sin and the sinner. Just as he cannot be bought off by our good works or pious thoughts, God is also not simply a machine who reacts to sin with some pre-set judgment, as if this sin would automatically bring on a lightning strike. He demonstrates his greatness in that our sin forces no such thing from him, as repellent and ugly as the sin may be. Not even a Hitler or a Stalin or a Mao for all the millions they slaughtered precipitated an act of God's vengeance. There was no thunderbolt from heaven, as much as we might have wanted it. No, God is moved not by our deeds but by his love, by his very nature. He is the unmoved mover who actions are purely his own. There is no button to push on God. He demonstrates his power in showing mercy, not what we deserve as if we had pushed the divine justice button and out comes the wrath. God has no buttons, he is much larger than that. He does what he does, because he is God.

We boldly ask something of this God who does what he does and has repeatedly and wonderfully acted in mercy. We ask this God for a full measure of grace, a gift which we do not deserve, which we have not paid for or earned, but which he can give. The grace, the gift of God to the undeserving, is simply the nature of God as he has revealed it in Christ. He did not need to come to that stable long ago or to that cross. Nothing compelled him; that is what makes that life and death so different. I have no choices about my birth or my death, I am only able to lay my life down in some act of service, but I am not able to take it and keep it forever. My own life is not really even mine. It is a gift given to me. I can relinquish it, but I cannot obtain it by any other means than a gift. And while I may have some choice about the manner and timing of my losing of life, I don't even have a choice about dying, not really. If I do not lay it down, it is not like I get to keep on living. Eventually my mortality catches up to me. Jesus, on the other hand, could have kept on living. He did not need to taste death, he needed to taste no suffering. His motive was purely within his own heart. God is purely act, there is no "re-act" in him. That can be said about no one else.

The gift we ask is not some bundle of cash or freedom from disease or even the end of warfare. We ask something much larger and harder to give. We want him to change human hearts. We ask him to call us with a creative word to repentance, to a reordering of our lives so that we may be the receivers of the gift of eternal life which he has given in Christ, the heavenly treasures

which Jesus has bestowed on Calvary, but which we may reject in stubborn foolishness and sinful pride.

This is the real terror of my situation. I cannot of myself even sign up for the free benefit which God provides. My heart is just too rotten to do that. I will repent begrudgingly, partially, less than whole heartedly. Always, in my darker corners, where the cockroaches of sin and my true passions live, I will repent of my repentance. I will try to work the system, use God's grace as a license to sin once more, to hold off until tomorrow to put that sin away, to try to achieve my happiness myself. God stands ready to give me eternal life and I know that there is a part of me that will always opt for what I know better. I know this life, even though logically I know it must die, I will choose it anyway. I am just broken that way. Like the balsa wood airplane my son had with a cracked wing. I would still fly; sort of, but always veer to one side. There was no fixing it, not really. It needed to be replaced. That was easily enough done with a trip to the dollar store. Where does one go to remedy what I am?

Notice that the sufficiency of God continues in the second element of the petition: That we be made partakers....” There is no result clause here. It is not the case that we repent and then God makes us a partaker, as if he was responding to our penitence, as if God only saved the people who were properly sorry. Both the repentance and the participation in heavenly treasures are gracious gifts from God, nothing is bought and sold here. God is not responding to us, he is giving to us. Are we really ready to preach that God does all of this?

Readings

Ezekiel 2:1-5 I have included some following verses, but wish I could have included the whole first chapter for you.

And he said to me, “Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.”² And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.³ And he said to me, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day.⁴ The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD.’⁵ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.⁶ And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions. Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house.⁷ And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.

⁸ “But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. Be not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you.”⁹ And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it.¹⁰ And he spread it before me. And it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

When we considered this passage some time ago, it was in the week after the Supreme Court of the US had legalized homosexual marriage. The comments below reflect reactions to that freshly done act, but it serves as a way to access this text which is helpful, so I have included them here.

What could this say to us as we consider the recent decision to legalize homosexual marriage in the US? We have long assumed that this was a Christian nation. Is that a false assumption? Did that change over the weekend or was it always false? Remember that most of the founding fathers did not acknowledge the deity of Christ. Jefferson and Franklin and others were enlightenment deists, not Christians. We found their ideas congenial to our Christianity, but it may not be a safe assumption that it was founded on Christian principles.

The Enlightenment sought to contain and control religion. After the bloody wars of the post-reformation period, the idea that Religion would be contained and kept outside the public sphere was attractive to a lot of people. It solved a huge problem. People were killing each other over religion. They wanted to deal with that. They needed to deal with that.

This was always complex. The Congregationalists in New England were firmly Calvinists who sought to merge the town and church council. It seems to me that the idea of America being a Christian nation arose and took root after the Civil War. It was not part of the original founding. There were voices arguing for it from the beginning and it may have been largely assumed by many, but the truth is that the U. S. was founded to contain and restrict the role of religion in the public decision making processes. From the beginning of our republic it was assumed that religion, while free to exercise in its private sphere, was not part of the public decision making process. It could shape the individual legislator, magistrate, etc., but public policy was not to appeal to religion as a basis.

One decision by the Supreme Court does not make us moral or not moral. Morality is an act of people. It is Jesus living out through his people. Supreme Courts do not make us moral or immoral.

Do you hear the resonance with readings from the last several weeks? If you preached the Job text you might remember that God spoke to Job from a whirlwind and commanded him to stand on his feet and brace himself like a man. Jeremiah, last week, felt helpless before a God who often seemed hostile to him. Ezekiel's call also leads the hearer to contemplate his/her own frailty before an almighty God.

Ezekiel was of the priestly families of Jerusalem. As such he was in the first batch of exiles that Nebuchadnezzar brought out of Jerusalem. You can read about this in the first chapter of Ezekiel and the final chapters of II Kings. Nebuchadnezzar left most of the people in this first wave of exile but he took the leaders. He was hoping to lop the head off of any future rebellion and that these exiled people would serve as hostages to discourage the remaining Jews should they be inclined to rebel again. It did not work. Within a decade King Zedekiah had stopped paying their

taxes and Nebuchadnezzar's armies were again encircling Jerusalem. This second invasion resulted in an exile which would be much more thorough and brutal.

God calls Ezekiel in that decade while Jerusalem still stands but things are unsettled. Many hoped that the Babylonians would relent and soon let them go back. Rumors abounded and much of Ezekiel's initial ministry is charged with the miserable task of squashing that hope. After the final fall of Jerusalem, God turns Ezekiel into a prophet of hope. That is where we read the story of the valley of the dry bones.

*Like Job, God speaks with Ezekiel, but not to challenge his civil case he is bringing against God, but because he loves his people and he has a job for Ezekiel to do. This is part of Ezekiel's call into ministry. If you want a really interesting read, just pick up the rest of that call vision in the first chapter of the book. It is right out of science fiction as Ezekiel sees chariots and great wheels flying in the sky, beasties with lots of faces and all sorts of things. Our reading pulls out the part of this that we will find easier to digest as children of the 20th and 21st centuries, admittedly, but I think without the fantastic element, we might be missing something here. His people had the hope squashed out of them. Ezekiel sees fantastic visions to awaken a sense of imagination in them so they can imagine the things that God is telling them. I think we live in a singularly unimaginative age. We think that everything is reducible to money. I heard a commentator suggest that the real reason young men are joining terrorist organizations because they cannot find good jobs. Really!? If they could only afford a nice meal out once in a while and a good used car, then they would not be terrorists. I think R. R. Reno was right in a recent edition of *First Things* when he noted that these men were joining ISIS because they were seeking redemption of some sort, an ordering of creation which they deemed to be more holy. In short, they were imagining something, a caliphate in which their god's justice obtained. We need to craft a counter-narrative which will replace that imagined future. Being able to afford a Big Mac extra value meal will hardly do it. Ezekiel is dealing with a people who have no hope and he starts by asking them to imagine something really strange. That is the precursor to his proclamation of God's rescue from Exile. They cannot look around them and see that future, they have to imagine that the God who brought them out of bondage in Egypt can bring them out of this miserable situation.*

Our text starts off with a command from God to Ezekiel. God's command, however, is not actually obeyed by Ezekiel, who has fallen down before God. The Spirit of God enters Ezekiel and stands him on his feet. We asserted earlier that this day seems to address the fear of inadequacy and this is a really important part of this. Ezekiel could not stand before God, he was physically incapable, he was spiritually incapable, but God's Spirit gave him the heart and the strength to stand. And it must be noted that Ezekiel stood; he did not simply have the desire to stand, but he actually stood. It would seem that God's first answer to our fear is that he makes us capable. It is standing that Ezekiel even admits that he now can hear God speaking.

God sends Ezekiel to a rebellious people, stubborn and with a history of rejecting God's entreaties and pleas and prophets. He does not send him out with a lot of encouragement or at

least with a promise of success. But he sends him. Why? Is it simply God covering his covenantal obligation so the Israelites won't ever be able to say that God never warned them? Is this the Old Testament version of the fine print in a contract which no one pays attention to but the legal types who say this must be said or the manufacturer is exposed to some liability?

That of course is ridiculous when talking about God, but I have heard that said about this text. I might have even said it once in less mature days of my interpretation. A quick look at the ministry of Ezekiel dispels that idea. Ezekiel is hardly fine print, he is a desperate plea from a loving God to his beloved people that would repent and live. His prophecy is written in large letters. Ezekiel is the baroque prophet of the Old Testament. His sign acts are over-the-top outlandish and bizarre. You sense almost a flavor some desperation in Ezekiel's ministry. He will spare nothing; he will forgo no humiliation or suffering to get this message across to the people. To convince them of their need to repent, he will shave his head and spread the hair in portions representing the scattering of God's people. He will construct an elaborate model of the city of Jerusalem to graphically illustrate that God is cut off when he erects a great iron plate outside it. He will lie on one side for over a year, and then flip over to repent for the people. When his wife dies, the love of his life, he will shed no tears and forgo all mourning to make his point. Ezekiel's whole life becomes a message from this day forward. And it works! The elders of Israel do start to listen to him. He is acknowledged as a prophet.

But God is not sanguine about the chances of this. He has a long history with this people. They are truly the Children of Israel/Jacob, the stinker whose story we read in Genesis. Jacob had tried to pull a fast one on God at Bethel, he tricked his brother out of a birthright and deceived his father into giving him a blessing. Israel is truly his name, it means he has wrestled with God and men.

God comes to an opponent people today, a people who have repeatedly betrayed and turned on him. Ezekiel should not think this will be easy nor should he think he comes with success guaranteed.

Herein lies the other thing God wants to say to the inadequate today. He is not blaming you for the failures of others to believe. He knows that this is not easy and failure is much more common than success. But he sends you anyway. He will sort this all out in the end, and he is a particularly wise and generous judge. We go not because we fear his evaluation of what we have done, but because he has picked us up and stood us on our feet and created in us the ears which hear, the heart which believes, and the eyes which now see all those people as the precious children of God.

Interestingly enough, Ezekiel is also a beacon of hope for us. Despite God's pessimistic evaluation of the people, Ezekiel may well be the most successful of OT prophets. Harry Wendt, the author of the Crossways Bible Study series, is fond of pointing out that archaeology suggests that 90% of the pre-exilic Jews worshiped Baal about 90% of the time. The post-exilic Jewish community seems to have worshipped Baal at rate of 10% of the people about 10% of the time.

He bases that simply on the sheer volume of Baal statues and household altars we find in the houses we have excavated from the different time periods.

Can we credit any of that to Ezekiel or was it the searing experience of the Exile and captivity? I am not in a position as a historian to say. As a theologian, I am in a position to say that by whatever means he used, God did it.

Psalm 123

To you I lift up my eyes,

O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

² Behold, as the eyes of servants

look to the hand of their master,

as the eyes of a maidservant

to the hand of her mistress,

so our eyes look to the LORD our God,

till he has mercy upon us.

³ Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.

⁴ Our soul has had more than enough
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.

This is one of the psalms of ascent. Jerusalem was built on a high hill and the temple of God was on the peak of that hill along with the palace and fortress of David. It was slog for the community to get up there. Apparently the people would sing this psalm and others as they climbed those steps and paths which lead to the temple, or at least that is the intent of the author of psalm. Who knows if they ever did or not? Only God and the folks who lived then I suppose. You can imagine, though, that this would have a special meaning for the sweating pilgrim walking past the leisurely resting apathetic who looked out of their doorway as they trooped past and up that hill. “Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.” It is hard to listen to the neighbor talk about the pleasures of sleeping in on a Sunday morning, isn’t it?

II Corinthians 12:1-10

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—⁶ though

if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

¹¹ I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. ¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. ¹³ For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

After chapter 9 of II Corinthians, many have noticed something of a tenor change in II Corinthians. Of course that is just too much for the speculative theologian to resist and you might find in your commentaries references here to a third Corinthian letter. The general idea is that the letter which we call II Corinthians concluded at chapter 7. Chapters 8 and 9 are then thought to be a more generic fundraising appeal which was attached to the end, either by Paul or by someone else.

Because chapter ten starts out a little harder in tone, many have thought that this is actually the “harsh letter” which Paul references earlier in II Corinthians. The premise is that the introduction to the letter somehow was lost or got eliminated and the body of that letter was originally put into the same scroll with II Corinthians and then, either intentionally or through some scribal error, migrated into the body of that letter.

Of course all this would be much better if we had one shred of textual evidence. As it is, this is simply the speculation of a whole class of people who call themselves theologians, have marvelous letters after their names which indicate their intellectual prowess, but whom I feel would be well served if they spent a few more hours at hospital bedsides, gravesides, and with the simple people of God. Then I think they might just realize that this sort of speculation does not really say much about God, but serves only to confuse. I am all for letting folks get a little confused mind you because sometimes that can lead them to think deeply and to trust Christ. But confusing them because I have a hair brained idea that will get an article or book published or a dissertation approved by a bunch of guys who have fled pastoral ministry for the academy just does not impress.

Now that I have that rant off my chest, we can look at this text. These readings are not normally chosen in the green season to correspond with the Gospel and Old Testament, but today it really does. Paul speaks of his own call. It was a convention in the ancient world that one simply did not make much use of the first person, especially the first person singular – the “I” or “me”

pronoun. So when Paul speaks of a “certain man” who was taken up to the third heaven, he is talking about himself and specifically the encounter with Christ on the Damascus road. His readers would have understood that in the first century.

He is taken to the third heaven. Of course if you have spoken to a Mormon about this they are immediately reading this one way. In fact, here the scholars can help us. The ancients were much more aware of their natural world than we usually credit them. They called the first heaven the blue sky. They could perceive that the stars of the black, night sky were much farther away. This black or starry (sidereal) heaven they called the second heaven. The third heaven is where God is.

Paul recounts that he came to this heaven, to the presence of God. He won't talk about it, won't boast about it; instead, he draws attention to a thorn in his flesh. He has asked God take it away but always God says that his strength is made perfect in the weakness of his servants. We don't know for sure what this thorn is. Some have suggested that Paul had poor vision. On one occasion he speaks of writing with large letters. Other have said that perhaps he had malaria. The Galatians met Paul because he seems to have been ill and Galatia had some health spas which were frequented by malaria sufferers in the first century, or we think it did. And there have been other suggestions, even that Paul had epilepsy or something like that. We don't know. Undoubtedly that is for the best.

God's answer seems to me to be the really important thing here. This is a locus for the doctrine we call the Theology of the Cross. God's strength, shown in mercy, is made more evident, more perfect, in my weakness, not my own strength. Failures, as surely a humble carpenter carrying his cross up a hill appears as a failure to our eyes, indeed, my failures are the occasions for God to succeed. The seed we sow must die before it can bear fruit. The kingdom often is found working in the rot and decay. Fertile soil is filled with dead and rotting things. You might just call it the compost principle. We want our churches to gleam, we want the big buildings, the security of a solid income stream so we don't have to wrestle with these nasty budget issues. But this is the theology of Glory when we think this way.

God sees this very differently. Our vulnerability makes us approachable. Our weaknesses, even our sins, make us regular people who cannot say that we are here because we got it right. We are here by the Grace of God and God is therefore built up. Paul himself is the archetype of this, he was a persecutor of God's people, turned into the preacher of God's love through Jesus. But you know that the story of his wicked past must have haunted his ministry. You can imagine anyone who disagreed with Paul and learned about his prior career as a toady for the High Priest in Jerusalem, a fire breathing Jewish Pharisee, would have found that irresistible.

Paul turned his past into the very occasion of grace in his preaching. It has actually proven to be a very successful motif. Again and again this story has repeated itself. Augustine will make much of the fact that he was a sexual libertine before his conversion. John Newton was pulled off a slave trading ship by his father before he wrote “Amazing Grace.” The fighting of the early churches gave us the Nicene Creed. This list could go on.

Mark 6:1-13

He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ² And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? ³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. ⁴ And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.” ⁵ And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. ⁶ And he marveled because of their unbelief.

And he went about among the villages teaching.

⁷ And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts—⁹ but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. ¹⁰ And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. ¹¹ And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. ¹³ And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

¹⁴ *King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known.*

What does this say to our situation? Jesus runs into a road block and changes his tactics. The disciples are sent out two by two. They are authorized and put into a situation in which they must trust. They go, and it works. The demons are cast out and the sick are healed.

Is this a model we are to follow?

Is this a promise we are to hear?

Is this a warning we should heed?

Is this is prescriptive or descriptive?. Is two-by-two evangelism a button to push and which will achieve results? Should we all adopt the LDS tactics here?

Does it suggest that Jesus kingdom is flexible?

Is the real message here that they went out. It did not always work. Sometimes they were rejected like Jesus was rejected. But sometimes it worked. Jesus finds his ministry constricted so he says to them, “why don't you guys try it!” Does that inspire confidence? Hardly.

We are being told by some voices that the sky is falling because the world is changing. It isn't. Jesus is still doing his job. The latest decision from the Supreme Court, the next economic crisis, or the next boundary of morality which is crossed is but a wakeup call to us that we are pilgrims

here. Our real citizenship is in heaven. We are always uncomfortable in this life. We don't really belong here, but we are called to serve here.

Our voices may be excluded from the public forum. We may lose our tax exempt status. We may be persecuted. That should not surprise us. They did not understand Jesus and they did not accept him. They won't accept us either. If we base our measure of success on their opinions of us we are not listening to Jesus.

If you have purchased and plowed through Jim Voelz's recent CPH commentary, you know that right here, when the scene of the action moves into Herod's court, the language in the book of Mark suddenly improves. It will revert back to Mark's less sophisticated Greek for a few more chapters but when Jesus shows up in the city of Jerusalem, the better Greek style returns. Voelz makes much of this and it is an interesting read. He concludes with many that the poor Greek of the first part is something of an affectation on the part of Mark, an attempt to communicate to this audience in an idiom which they knew.

In the past when we considered these texts we wondered how do these passages of Ezekiel and Mark interact and relate to the great commission in which we are enjoined to make disciples. One seems to be saying that we are supposed to make the disciples and the others seem to be saying that God is aware that it is not going to work all the time and we should just move on. What does this say about my ministry as a licensed deacon or a pastor or a parishioner?

We wondered where the compassion for the lost is in that combination. What does that say about us? What does that say about God? Is the grace here simply the reality that we are not God, we don't have a burden laid upon us which belongs to God. Are we so afraid of the rejection and scorn that Jesus faced that we are silent?

God says, go out and make the effort. "Ezekiel," God says, "I have put my spirit in you and put words in your mouth." And then one considers the Gospel lesson. Jesus tried and failed sometimes too. The unbelief of his own hometown thwarted him. The very nature of the kingdom is that it is fraught with failure. Jesus does not send out these disciples with the expectation that this will always work. They have the command to preach, not to succeed in the conversion game. That seems to be the message of the parable of sower and the soils. The way this thing works is that sometimes it takes a whole series of people. Is this why Jesus called 12 disciples to be witnesses, because one witness just is not enough? Am I called to be the first witness and someone else, perhaps the 12th witness, will get to see the fruit?

Does this also mean that sometimes we can see that we are part of a much larger picture? Ezekiel was successful, but he was the last in a very long line of disappointed prophets. Many prophets of God have preached this same message of repentance and seen very little of it. Ezekiel happened to be the man at the moment when the exile happened and as a result he got to see the repenting.

What does this say about the kingdom of God? Are we back to the blades of grass versus the blades of my lawnmower illustration? The grass will win eventually, but the chattering blades of

my lawnmower will cut it down quite a few times but eventually the lawnmower goes to the dumb while the grass continues to grow. Is it the case that if one drunk guy has come to faith through my ministry that is ten times larger in God's eyes than the guy down the street who has manipulated a thousand into his doors but they are not there out of faith? Or is that just me trying to feel better about myself and my failures?

Jesus comes home, not Nazareth, but Capernaum. Nazareth was just a collection of little houses outside of this larger town. Capernaum was where he had his base of operations. His disciples return with him. He left here in chapter 1 of Mark, because he had come to preach to other villages too. Since then he has even ventured across the lake and met the Gerasene demoniac.

His reception is not exactly warm. The people are amazed at this teaching, but they reject it. Is he not after all someone they have seen grow up? Don't they know this guy's family? Who does he think he is?

Their lack of faith thwarts even Jesus' ministry among them. Mark makes the amazing statement that he could do no mighty work there. Of course, Christian piety listens to other passages in the Bible and notes that the necessity is not imposed on Jesus by some force or power, but he chooses to work through faith, and a failure to believe gives him nothing for him to work with.

Jesus, rejected by the people in town, heads out to the villages. Not only does he head out but he multiplies the ministry. It seems like an odd thing to do right after a failure. Do we too easily get discouraged by our failures? Jesus goes out among the villages again, teaching, but this time he expands or multiplies his ministry. He sends out the twelve in six teams of two. Is it just clear that the task simply exceeds the physical ability of one itinerant preacher? The text doesn't really tell us, and we need to recognize anything we put there as speculation. For whatever reason Jesus sends out the twelve, perhaps it is for their sake, perhaps it is because the need is so great, perhaps it is something different and all of the above.

Jesus pairs them up. Not a bad idea, there is encouragement and comfort in having a friend at your side. Two often are stronger together than they are by themselves. But this is not about strength, at least as Jesus talks about it. He gives them authority over demons and diseases, but not over whether people accept their message. In fact, if they are rejected, the most they can do is really just to walk out, shake the dust off their sandals and move on. They should not hop around town, looking for better accommodations. They enter a house and stay. If there is no place to stay, move on.

There is no guarantee of success, there is no key or mechanism or secret to winning the hearts of the hearer. There is the simple command to go and preach with authority. It might work, it might not. No word on how long one should stay before moving on. Nor is there any indication of just what rejection means.

The disciples do this, they perform wonders and signs and report back to Jesus. No word on how many times they did the sandal shaking thing or if they ever did. Some folks apparently believed, they preached repentance and cast out demons and anointed the sick with oil and healed them.

So many questions about this event, and no answers in sight. Was Jesus teaching them? Was he training them? Was he expanding his ministry? Was he ...? What? The text is silent. I have read so many different pastors, newsletters, commentators, and consultants use this passage to justify the program of the moment that I have become hesitant about reading too much into this.

All I can do is imagine what it must have been like to have been one of the average disciples, not Peter or John or James, but what if you were the other James or Thaddeus or maybe Philip, one of those guys who doesn't hardly say a word in the New Testament and if he did not show up in the list of the disciples we would never remember him. What did he think? Mark does seem bent on telling us that Jesus was not always successful. His home town had not received him. The parable of the sower has already told us that occasionally the kingdom does not work. Do you suppose that nearly anonymous disciple was nervous and excited when Jesus pitched this plan to them? Did everyone try to get paired up with Peter or James? Did they shy away from Judas Iscariot? Were they afraid like we are when God tells us to go out and make disciples? Did they have a sense that they are not up to this task?

This text poses some hard questions and forces us into some uncomfortable reflection. It is true, we are often prone to measure our success in the number of baptisms we perform or the "success" as the world might measure it. But God seems to measure here that they went out. But we dare not get too complacent in order to say that we are not being measured by our success in making disciples. In truth, Jesus did send them out. Too often are we not talking inwardly to ourselves, gathering around a Bible and talking over it to one another, but not actually getting out there into the world. Jesus does not give them much in the way of resources. But we often won't go out until we have our fortress in order, our budget balanced, ourselves taken care of. Our "outreach" is often only conducted from the excess, not as the basic mission of the Church.

We cannot imagine that God looks on our lack of success and says, "at least they tried." Are we really even trying? God's Word is vibrant – Isaiah 55 tells us that it never returns to God empty. But if we won't splash the water on the infant, we don't have a baptism. If the word is cooped up inside our buildings and inside our Christianity which is so private as not to offend our neighbors, have we actually failed? God's word will do its thing, but the seed has to be planted. In the grain silo it is only animal feed.

The preacher might want to consider Francis of Assisi, whose movement, the Franciscans, swept Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries, attracting thousands to join him. He listened to these words and took them to be spoken directly to him. He renounced all property, took up poverty, had a preaching mission pressed upon him, and transformed much of Christianity. Many looked at how he was living a life they imagined to be much more Christlike and they were profoundly attracted that. They compared him to the rapacious and often callous hierarchy of the time, a church they did not respect, and they flocked to him. If you want to read a really good biography of Francis, I recommend "Francis of Assisi: A New Biography" by Augustine Thompson, O. P. published by Cornell Univ. Press in 2012.

Law

1. There are a lot of problems in my own life, let alone looking too closely at my neighbors. I see them and am sorely tempted to breathe a sigh of relief that it is not me who suffers so. I know it could be me next time.
2. Yet God has said that it is not good for the man to be alone, and it has created me in a community, whether I accept that or not. Humanity simply is a group experience. We have family and neighbors and fellow congregants. I need people to employ me, people I can employ. My children need teachers, my senility will need someone to feed me in the nursing home.
3. God has given me a charge to care for all the people of this world, yes the stranger on the other side of this globe and the neighbor who dumps garbage over the fence into my yard and my child whom I have held in my arms. Their eternal life might hang on my telling them the good news.
4. I am not very good at changing my own heart, how am I supposed to do anything about my neighbor. How can I hope to succeed? God has given me an impossible mission.
5. Does God have a really stinky plan or what? This is not going to work. You don't recruit a football team at a nursing home? You don't look for winners in line at the soup kitchen. Why is he looking for a kingdom team with losers like me?
6. Our Churches have too often not heeded Jesus admonition to go and make disciples. We have become country clubs for Christians and our communities are left wondering who we are and what we do, if they even ask.

Gospel

1. Jesus knows my problems and he knows my neighbors problems, that is the whole point of the incarnation and the cross. Christ embraced this whole world and gave his life for every problem, mine and my neighbors and the guy who lives on the other side of the world.
2. The community which was shattered in Eden's fall has been restored in Christ and in the righteous reign of Christ I experience a true fellowship as sins are forgiven and love is reborn daily. This then radically alters my relationships with others, no longer simply the stuff of necessity and self-interest, the people around me become genuinely precious.
3. God cares for the world and that is exactly why he sent me to tell this good news and not some angel. I am of the world, redeemed and made whole once more. It is exactly my story and my experience which they need to see and hear. Thus God works through my halting speech, feeble acts, and miserable attempts. Their very brokenness lends potency to my message as in my weakness his strength is perfected.

4. Thus, I can succeed, or more properly put, God can use me to change my neighbors heart because he has already started to work on mine and continues to work on mine. The good work begun will continue until he brings it to completion on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.
5. God's upside down world of winning through losing and dying to live is not really such a stinky plan after all. In fact it reflects an otherworldly genius. The broken of the world are the perfect vessels for its salvation. No, it does not always look like it bears fruit and the Christian needs to enter this with a certain realism, but he also needs and receives from God a hopeful faith that sees every conversation, every relationship, every encounter as an event laden with the potential for it to be a God moment.
6. Jesus sends us, yes even us. He has not given us great treasure to accomplish this in worldly terms, but he has given us authority over sins. We can forgive them. When we do, they go away, they are forgiven.

Sermon Ideas

1. Sent! (OT and Gospel – that the Holy Spirit would recall the hearer to the mandate of Christ to go to family and friend, co-worker and neighbor with the kingdom of Lord Jesus.)

Ezekiel is sent to a stubborn and difficult people whom God has labored to bring to repentance. Perhaps now they are ready. Jesus sends forth his disciples with the realistic expectation that some will not listen.

In our baptism the Spirit of God has joined us to the ranks of prophets and apostles, missionaries and evangelists, Christians of every age. The same God who sent Ezekiel and those twelve disciples is sending us, calling us to harvest fields and labors for the kingdom. It is unlikely that he is calling us to some wild adventure overseas, but perhaps he is. But he is calling all of us to our own homes, our neighborhoods, schools, and places of work. There we are his masks, the agents by which he works his kingdom today.

We can take a few things away from the sending of Ezekiel and the disciples today which will be of great value to our hearers.

- a. Being on a mission from God does not guarantee success by any human measure. Prophets regularly were martyred and most of the men whom Jesus sent out that day were eventually martyred, ridiculed and humiliated. The world counted them as failures, but God did not.
- b. God's sending is occasioned by his persistent and durable love for people. The Israelites had turned time and again away from God. Yet Ezekiel was sent. Jesus was rejected in Capernaum yet he multiplied his ministry. God doesn't give up.

- c. God goes with those whom he sends. Ezekiel would be strengthened to stand up to the scorn and rejection of his countrymen. They would know that a prophet had been among them. Jesus' disciples do wonders and miracles which no human could perform. Yet, they did do these things because God was with them.
- d. Being sent requires trusting God to keep his promises. Ezekiel and the Disciples were sent with what must have seemed like wholly inadequate resources. No spare tunic or belt, just what they had on them and the Word of God. If the disciples would eat they had to believe that God would provide for them.
- e. Being sent means losing some measure of control. Ezekiel will become a living illustration of what God wants, sometimes having to do embarrassing and difficult things. The disciples did not get to control their circumstances either. There was no backup plan, no plane which would whisk them to a modern hospital if they got sick or an insurance plan which would cover them if there was an accident. It was just in God's hands. It must have been frightening.

It doesn't sound like it should work, but it does. 2 billion folks around the world have heard those whom God has sent and believed. How did that happen? I cannot know. But it worked.

We are sent with a counter-narrative which competes with the narrative of the world. The LGBTQ+ community defines the human being almost exclusively as a sexual being. We don't deny the sexuality but it involves so much more than that. We have a narrative which is rooted in the creation of God, the redemption of that creation in Christ, and which involves the whole of the human being. We are dependent beings, people who derive meaning and purpose from God, not from glands and urges.

The sermon will need to end on the hopeful promise that God is at work in our ministry and witness. It might not look like it works, but in Christ it really does. People do believe.

2. 12 foolish men, a mandate and a whole world to change. (Gospel: That the hearer would believe that God has authorized and empowered him/her to be a vital part of a great plan to save this world. Each of us is a witness, perhaps the witness another person needs.)

This sermon wants that hearer to go out and build the relationship and be the witness in that relationship. It might simply give some very practical help toward that end. It is an evangelism sermon. The kingdom of God comes through people simply speaking the praise of what God has said and done in their lives. It is not magic, it is not hard. It is telling folks what we have seen.

We are a people driven by success. We measure it in the dollars we earn, the honors we collect, the promotions we receive, the size of our house, our car, or our boat. Our culture defines success as visible and tangible and measurable. And it is true the proof is in

pudding, there is nothing like results to demonstrate success. But notice something about Jesus today and what he does and says to his disciples, to us. First of all, notice that Jesus is the most successful founder of a movement the world has ever seen. The Christian Church is the oldest and largest organization in the whole world. But even Jesus had a day when things did not work so well. When he went to his home town they did not believe him, even though he had done miracles in other villages nearby. Should we really go out with the idea that every time we witness it will work? Perhaps everyone really needs a dozen witnesses to believe. Maybe I am number 5 and seven more folks will need to tell this person before it “clicks” and a living faith is born. But is number five any less important than the number twelve witness who gets to see the magical moment of a new Christian being made? God has sent us, weak and foolish though we may be. He has empowered our witness with His Spirit and given us the authority to speak the very forgiveness of sins. We were baptized into the Name of Jesus, the name before which demons tremble and by which the dead must be raised on the last day. We cannot know where we fit into this whole picture, that is simply beyond us, but that we are in God’s plan we can with confidence say “Yes!” As another human being who has encountered the forgiving and living Jesus, he has looked each of us in the eye and claimed us as his own.

Jesus sent out ordinary people – we have no excuse to be quiet. Jesus sent out ordinary people and did great things through them – we also have great hope. The demons were subject to the first disciples. The sins of our neighbors are subject to us. We can forgive them.

Often times people come to faith in the midst of events. The word we give, the Jesus word may lie dormant for some time. The key is that we are a friend, in a loving supporting relationship. They will often tell us when they are ready to talk about Jesus, but they cannot come to us if they don’t already know that we simply care about them. We have sacrificed self for them, cross-like. We may not preach to them right away. Like talking about sex with a child, we answer their questions but we don’t push that. We might simply let them know we go to church and wait for them to ask us what that means.

How does one build the desire/love which actually breaks out of the circle of friends that we have here at church? How do we do this in order to welcome a new face, a new friend into that circle, with the realization that we might never get to see this person come to faith, but we pray and count on God to be there? Jesus loves those people, just like he loves me. Therein lies our motive, at least part of it.

This sermon addresses the fear that many have of being an evangelist. Do you suppose the disciples were afraid? They are not called to be some sort of biblical expert or master of theology. We don’t have to memorize some story from the bible; we only have to tell our own story. Just like we can tell a neighbor about our new grandchild, we can tell

about the new car, or we can go on and on about the good restaurant we discovered, we can also tell them what Jesus has done to us, for us. Our genuine love for another person will always be welcome. Remember too that our very brokenness is often the very thing that makes us the effective witness. That God has loved me despite me is very powerful. Don't be afraid to be a broken vessel. That is the whole point of God's love.

3. A power made perfect in weakness (Epistle: that the hearer would be graced by God to see their past and their present through God's eyes – opening the doors of possibility and promise in every relationship and every encounter)

This is a sermon of the theology of the cross, namely that God's kingdom has always worked in ways that seem upside down and backward to the world. Right now our people are likely feeling powerless. We are watching a rapid and fundamental shift in our culture. We are powerless to stop it. The culture seems to be racing toward a cataclysm. We used to think that we controlled the levers of power in this country and now we no longer do. The levers we are pulling don't seem to be connected to any of the pulleys, gears, or cables any more. They just sort of flop around in our hands. Others seem to be in control. We feel powerless.

Paul prayed three times to be relieved of his thorn. Jesus prayed three times to be spared the cross in Gethsemane. God said no to both of them. He sent an angel to Jesus, he promises to Paul that God's strength is made perfect in Paul's weakness. What is he saying to our prayers? What are we looking for? What are we blind to?

Paul says that God retains the thorn in his flesh to keep him from being conceited. Are the events of our cultural revolution happening right now because the Church has become conceited?

Our expectation of God is often that success is measured in human terms, big buildings and lots of people and all the wonderful measurable things which we think mean that we have succeeded. We look at a Rick Warren or a Willow Creek Church and wish we could be that successful. But does God really see it that way? This is the God who won the victory by dying on the cross. This the God who did not choose emperors and senators and generals for his disciples but fishermen and tax collectors and zealots. This is the Jesus who sent the woman he met at the well at noon back into the village with the good news (John 9) and the demoniac (Mark 5) back to his people with the same good news.

I know that I am perhaps guilty of being the guy whose church is small and justifying his lack of success theologically. But I really don't think so. The closest Jesus gets to a pep talk to his witnessing disciples is when he tells them that they will be persecuted and betrayed, handed over to governors and kings, and when they are being stomped on they should lift their heads and rejoice because their salvation is nigh. Christ has put his stamp on this kingdom, at least the kingdom we see, when he wore a crown of thorns and hung on a cross. Paul prayed for God to remove that thorn, but the thorn was actually the

important thing and God's power was made perfect in Paul's weakness. He could have proclaimed his awesome visit with Jesus, but he spoke of his weakness instead.

Remember the collect of the day. We acknowledge that God known chiefly in his mercy. God doesn't stomp on the bad guys and reveal himself that way. He is known through his loving mercy. How are we known? The law changes nothing. It is only the Gospel that changes people. We are quick to tell people when they are wrong, but chances are they already know that. Do we ever tell them that Jesus loves sinners.

For the Christian today this does a couple of things, First it is a reality check on the expectations we might have. While sometimes we get to see amazing success, there is no promise of that, only a promise that God is with us, helping us, and he will make our lives meaningful in his kingdom his way. The blood of martyrs was often the seed of the church. That leads to the second thing we do. We are given to see our past and present as a reality laden with potential for God to work and we come to our future with great hope. Our God works via weakness, even my weakness. Jesus became helpless, suffered at the hands of ruthless men, so that he might save the world. Likewise that cross is evidenced today in the suffering, weak, and otherwise cross-like lives of his people.

This sermon will proclaim a gospel to people who feel powerless. Jesus' grace is sufficient. Our weakness and impotence are not really the problems. Rather, Jesus' power and mercy are the real things here. He provides the reality defining truth which we know. We don't have to have the answers or the solutions. He has it. He is good for it. Being in the weak spot can be a great place to be. God often works best through us in that place.