

Sermon Title: Sufficient Grace
Text: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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One of the speakers who was at the Pastor Theologian gathering I attended a couple of weeks ago was a woman by the name of Cheryl Bridges Johns, who teaches theology at the Church of God Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee. She spends her professional life trying to give some theological shape to what is one of the most significant shaping factors of the face of Christianity in the 21st century: Pentecostalism.

As she began to speak, I thought of our Spiritual Quest class here at Memorial, and their annual trip to the Assembly of God church, and how challenging it is to our established ways of being church to be a part of a worship service in which not only emotional, but physical participation is so central. Professor Johns asked us to consider the positive theological contributions this fastest growing facet of worldwide Christianity might make to the larger conversation, and one of the points she made was that the sort of Christianity that *we* are most comfortable with tends to look at chaos or disorder as something that needs to be avoided at all costs—a sign of God’s absence. Pentecostals, she said, view chaos—anarchy is the word she used—as a reliable point at which we might discern God’s entry into this world. What’s happening in Pentecostal worship, she said, is that anarchy is “lured into the sacred circle” and tamed.

I don’t think I’ve got a Pentecostal bone in my body, and so feel completely unqualified to assess Ms. Johns’ argument, but it *did* get me to thinking about the question she raised about *my* favored ways of thinking about my faith. It’s not just when I talk with the kids who come back from their Assembly of God adventure, or when I see pictures of *Lifefest* in the Post Crescent, with thousands of folk waving their hands in the air—“rockin’ out” to Jesus. It’s there as well when I attend to Scripture, with stories of voices, and visions, and pillars of smoke and fire—of demons cast into swine, and of tongues of fire enlivening frightened disciples, or Paul, struck blind on the road to Emmaus. For someone whose faith mostly comes through my ears and into my brain, who *likes* things “decent and in order” there’s a real challenge when that faith washes over into categories of “emotion” and “feeling” and hearts warmed, strangely or otherwise.

“I know a person in Christ” Paul says...and the church throughout the ages has winked and nudged. Yeah, Paul, we know that person, too. From Tarsus, right? Used to be known as Saul? “I know a person 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. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard such things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to speak.” My religious tentacles contract, and my back stiffens. Don’t *go* there, Paul! Next thing you know, he’ll be asking if I’ve been born again, or slain in the Spirit. And I’ll find myself dancing around that fire of private experience and personal feelings that more often than not consume rather than illumine.

It’s there, an undeniable part of our Spiritual attic: ecstatic experiences. But this may be a confessional moment more than anything else. Whatever such “spiritual experiences” “Mountaintops” or transfiguration moments I might have had in my own life, they’ve always

been far too ephemeral to ground the faith that leads me back down the mountain. Those moments are gifts, and as is true of all precious gifts they should be enjoyed, savored, recalled with gratitude. But at the end of the day they are more like a cool mist that splashes my face on a 90-degree day than the rich, dark soil from which a deeply rooted faith can grow.

It was during the last presentation of that conference that it started to become at least a little clear to me. Serene Jones was the speaker. She's a teacher, too, at Yale Divinity School. And she started in a confessional mode, as well, admitting that while she was a committed church person, who attends worship just about every week, and truly loves the community, and the challenge of living a Christian life, she has found herself just a little bit *bored* by it all—longing for a sense of *passion* that seems to have slipped away from the way we tend to “do” church. “Desire” is the language she used, and the sentence that caught me up short was this: “at a theological level, a church that has lost its desire has lost an important component of what God has given us for the world. *God* loves this world passionately, and the purpose of the church is, as the Westminster Confessions insist, to “glorify God and *enjoy*...” Or as the musical, “Damn Yankees” puts it, “You’ve gotta have heart!”

She's right, of course. If what we are about here does not in some deep way stir us, impassion us, touch our hearts, and resonate with our souls, then how can it be a reflection of that God who was so passionate about this world that he could not, at the end of the day, leave it in darkness, but in order to *save* it became a *part* of it. But I realized, as well, that there is an important distinction to be made between insisting that a particular type of experience, be it emotional, or spiritual, or whatever, is the necessary starting point of faith—“born again” or “touched by the Spirit”—and insisting that the arrow of faith cannot pierce our souls without also cutting through our heart. It's a difference of cause and effect.

And it is, I think, what Paul had in mind in raising his own extraordinary experience to mind in his letter to the church in Corinth. Where does Paul go with that story? Does he insist that on the basis of it, we all need to listen to what he has to say? Does he offer it as some kind of validation of his authentic apostolic call? Does he suggest that you're not quite Christian until you've made it to that level of ecstatic experience? Quite the opposite: “I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.” Then he goes on to speak of his “thorn in the flesh”, and that “thorn” that he then identifies has been diagnosed in more ways than I can number through the centuries—from epilepsy to homosexuality to depression—but I think such attempts to pin down the malady miss the point. What Paul wants the Corinthians to know is that, sure, he'd had these kinds ecstatic experience, but *his* faith is not grounded there, any more than it was grounded in his experience of brokenness and pain. Rather, his experience—*all* of his experience, both the agony and the ecstasy, was grounded and fulfilled in his faith. “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

The point is brought home for me by our Gospel lesson, as I realize that Jesus does not meet the disciples high up on the mountaintop, whip them up into a spiritual frenzy through some extraordinary spiritual experience, and then send them off to make disciples of all nations. Not in Mark. It's again the opposite. Jesus' ministry is about as low as it can go, as even the folk in his own hometown seem less than interested in his version of God's reign. Lurking just around the corner is the story of Herod and John the Baptist—things will go from bad to worse. And

Jesus most certainly offers no pep talk or motivational speech. He ordered them to take *nothing* with them, but their walking staff—not even bread for the journey. Because in the end, what they needed was not anything they had: God’s grace—the authority which was Jesus’ alone to give—was sufficient. And it was by that grace alone that those who were sent out discovered they were able to do the most astounding things, casting out demons, and healing the sick.

It reminds me that the core of our identity as Christians, individually, and as a church, does not rest in something that happened to us, once upon a time. It’s not something we can grasp through even the most careful consideration and analysis any more than it is a “feeling” that we can induce, or reproduce at will. Rather, our Christian identity unfolds as we move into our own worlds, to cast out the demons of our age, and heal the ills of those whom we meet, as we teach, and pray, and share the Good News that has been entrusted to us.

All of this circles around to this question that’s sort of been nagging at us for the past year: how is God calling us to be the church in this place, in our own time? And it occurs to me that it might be that part of our problem is that we tend to think of “church” as a noun—and a pretty passive one at that—a place where folk come to get their spiritual bearings, a little “soul lift” or a cup of cool water.

But what if “church” really is more a *verb*, and a very *active* one at that? Remember that buried beneath our translation, the word the New Testament writers used for the church was “ecclesia” those who had been called out—who had heard God’s voice, and moved into the world to bring, in Jesus’ own words, “good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

I don’t know how you would go about any of that without a modicum of passion, but you understand, it’s not that some definite set of spiritual experiences moves us into the world. Rather it is as we move into the world we are shaped as much as it by the powerful Spirit that moves in us and through us to reclaim and reshape, and redeem this world that God loves so well.

I don’t think this is anything we don’t know already, if we just think about the times when *this* congregation has been most clearly faithful to its calling. When a group of physicians decided, fifty years ago, that this community needed alternatives in medical care, and what was to become Appleton Medical Center emerged; when some in the church recognized the needs of young children of migrants and immigrants for high quality child care with a sensitivity to their language and social needs, and Project Bridges pretty much took over half of the nice new building we’d built for ourselves. It’s when our youth have gone to places as far as Puerto Rico and Philadelphia, or as near as Arpin, or Harbor House; on Saturday mornings when a small group has gathered with filter masks and hammers to reclaim housing for the poorest in our community. It’s when meals are served at the Salvation Army, and children are gathered for Vacation Church School, or our dining room fills on Wednesday evenings, and we put on cowboy boots or fake Italian mustaches just to have some fun, and share twenty minutes between generations that in our day to day world are separated by walls of programming, schedules and interests.

It's not when we finally get ourselves feeling right that we've made our way into the world with God's Good News. It's when we've made our way into God's world with that great Good News that we've recognized that *feeling—yes! This* is what it means to be the church!

Our truest vision will not, I suspect, emerge from one more conversation, or round table, or committee meeting. It will come as we take that risk, and realize that the core of this faith that binds us is not to be found in what it has to offer to me—whether ecstatic hearts, or tightly reasoned theologies, or deep and lasting friendships. The core of this faith will be found as we offer *ourselves*: our gifts, our intellect, our experience, our passion, to *God's* work in this world.

Let us pray.