

PENTECOST 7 YEAR B
EZEKIEL 2:1-5
2 CORINTHIANS 12:2-10
MARK 6:1-13
JULY 7, 8, 2018

Last week, Jenny, Alec, Kayley, Mackenzie, Matthew and I were in Houston for the national youth gathering. It was a great time for us to be together in a place we were filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit. We heard great music and enjoyed wonderful worship services. There were many speakers offering inspiration and hope even in the midst of our life challenges and struggles. It seems that each of our speakers told about God being near or being revealed to them as they faced those challenges. In some cases, the speakers spoke of their struggles as weakness. Speaker after speaker told about God's love that changes everything. It offers grace and restores hope. We were touched along with 30,000 others as we gathered. For me, among the messages was the assurance that the church is not dead and our God is not dead. The church is very much alive and ready to serve the Lord in new and special ways.

2 Corinthians 12:6, 7 But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.

In the middle chapters of 2 Corinthians Paul was claiming his place among the apostles. Some in the Corinthian church challenged Paul's right to be called an apostle. He did not meet the normal established criteria for apostleship. Paul told about his vast knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures and his status among the Pharisees and in the Sanhedrin. Paul also told about his conversion experience and that he had no right and no reason to boast in Christ. As Paul tells of his spiritual experience in these verses he tells of things too wonderful to tell about. He tells about meeting Jesus Christ in a special way and receiving revelation in a way the others might not have experienced. In many places Paul

tells that he is not an apostle by his own power and authority but by the call of God through Jesus Christ. Paul claims no right to boast of anything but in his weakness, he is made strong.

Friday evening of our youth gathering we heard a speaker whose name is Pastor Will Starkweather. He told about his struggles with depression and with cutting himself. He was a good student and involved in many things. He had lots of friends but that did not stop his feelings of not fitting and not being good enough. If anyone looked at his appearance they would see that he had everything going for him. He explained that his way of coping with his feelings of inadequacy was to cut himself. Pastor Will told the gathering that he was working in a church and studying to be a pastor while in his struggles. He finally decided to make himself vulnerable to someone he could trust. He made the decision to confide in his pastor. Pastor Will told of the things he was doing and what he was feeling. The pastor responded with words that supported what Pastor Will felt all along. His pastor responded to his story with a four-word sentence. He spoke these words, *"You're going to hell!"*

Many in the crowd at the youth gathering heard the response of the pastor and could not believe their ears. There were groans of disbelief and feelings of sadness for Pastor Will. I heard the pastor's response and was sad along with the others but I was also troubled in my heart. I was troubled because a pastor would condemn someone to Hell when that person came to be cared for and to hear assurance of God's love. I was also troubled as I searched my memory hoping to not find a time when I spoke those words to someone coming to me in need. Have I regarded another person's life struggles and challenges as sending them to Hell? I hope I have never done that.

2 Corinthians 12:8, 9 Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but 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

Pastor Will told that he continued in his depression and the downward spiral lasted for a couple of more years. He left the church for a time and continued to cut himself. Pastor Will told about going to see another pastor. He again told his story about the struggle with depression and with cutting himself. This pastor gave a quite different response. She shared a word of hope and of grace. It was a word that made all the difference for Pastor Will. It was a word that became reality for many of the 30,000 in the crowd and it was a welcome word for me. Her message also consisted of four words. The pastor said these words, "There's grace for that!"

Paul came to understand the power of God's love and grace. He did not need to boast of his knowledge or his education. Paul did not need to prove his worthiness to be an apostle. Paul was set apart by God's grace. By grace God sent Paul to the Gentiles even though he was an educated Jew. Paul proclaims his weakness and lifts the power of Christ. He claims no eloquence of speech but gives glory to God for all that is done. For Paul, Jesus Christ is everything to everyone. We are here to live our faith and share the grace of God.

2 Corinthians 12:10 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.

Paul understood his limitations when it comes to serving the Lord. He knew that apart from God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he could do nothing for Christ. Paul says he is content with his weakness and everything else that comes with being a Christian. Our last afternoon in Houston our group walked a few blocks from our hotel to a shopping mall close by. We had eaten there a day earlier and found a nice variety of food. This time the mall was closed but across the street was a grocery store called "Phoenicia Foods." We went to see what they had to eat. As we were there a police officer engaged in conversation. He asked if we were getting ready to leave Houston. At first, I didn't know if he

was hoping this was the case or not. As we talked he thanked us for being there and for making a difference in their city. If we look at the numbers of people, 30,000 is not a big number when compared to more than 2 million people. We were a relatively small group but did big things for the Lord. In our weakness we were made strong through Jesus Christ. The Lord worked a good work so that even the police officers and many others saw God at work through 30,000 kids.

The church is very much alive. We may look like we are on the decline or in trouble but God is at work. We have life because of Jesus Christ. In our weakness and in our challenges God is revealed. Jesus Christ is made known in ways that surprise us but are mostly welcome. Even when the tasks before us are enormous we have a God that empowers us and walks before us. There is not task too large and no job too difficult for the Lord. What we came to understand last week in Houston I now say to you. **“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” AMEN**