

7-4-2021 6th Pentecost

[John and Mary Ellen Nowel, with Gary Sponholtz, singing 'Everything Is Beautiful' by Ray Stephens and 'The Wayfaring Stranger'. John Nowel plays the violin, Mary Ellen plays the guitar, and Gary plays the piano.]

Welcome, friends, to our July 4th worship celebration. We remember today the origins of our own country and origins of our faith.

We begin in the name of God, Abba Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Pour out your wisdom upon us, O God, that we might share in the mysteries of new life you have offered us in the rising Christ. We pray in his name. Amen.

The first lesson for today is from the prophet **Ezekiel**. It is his call to the prophetic life. [2: 1-5, 9-10; 3: 1-3]

God said, 'Son of man. Get to your feet; I will speak to you.' And as he said these words the Spirit came into me and put me on my feet, and I heard him speaking. He said, 'Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to the rebels who have rebelled against me. They and their ancestors have been in revolt against me up to the present day. Because they are stubborn and obstinate people, I am sending you to them, to say, " Lord Yahweh says this." Whether they listen or not, this tribe of rebels will know there is a prophet among them....

I looked and was offered this gift from a hand stretching out to me a scroll. He unrolled it in front of me and on it was written on the front and the back; on it was written, 'Lamentations, dirges, and cries of grief'. Then he said to me, 'Son of man, eat what you see; eat this scroll, then go and speak to the House of Israel.' I opened my mouth; he gave me the scroll to eat, and then he said, 'Son of Man feed on this scroll which I'm giving you and eat your fill.' So, I ate it, and it tasted sweet as honey.

The Word of God.

From **2 Corinthians, chapter 12**. [2 Cor. 12: 7-10]

Paul writes, 'So that I should not get above myself. I was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to batter me and prevent me from getting above myself.

About this, I have three times pleaded with the Lord that it might leave me; but he has answered me, 'My grace is sufficient for you: for power is at full stretch in weakness.' It is, then, about my weaknesses that I am happiest of all to boast, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me; and that is why I am glad of weaknesses, insults, constraints, persecutions, and distress for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am most strong.

The Gospel for today is from **Mark, chapter 6.** [Mk 6: 1-6] Jesus returns home.

Leaving the place where he was, Jesus went to his hometown of Nazareth, and the disciples accompanied him there. With the coming of the Sabbath he began teaching in the synagogue, and most of them were astonished when they heard him. They said, 'Where did this man get all of this? What is this wisdom that has been granted to him, and these miracles that are worked through him? This is the carpenter's son, surely, the son of Mary, brother of James and Joseph, and Jude and Simon? His sisters, too, are they not living here with us?' And the local folks would not accept him.

Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is despised only in his hometown and country, and among his relations, and in his own house.' And Jesus could work no miracles there, except that he cured a few sick people. Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith.

The Word of God.

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In the name of God, Abba Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm shared with you on other occasions, but I'll remind you today that it has been taught that there are really only four religions in the world. The First is the religion of chaos--total disruption, people don't know what's going on, or where they are. The Second religion is that of institutionalism, which works very hard to confine and control the box inside of which people live. Everything is decided for you. And there's only one sin in the realm of Stage 2 religion, and that is, 'Do not doubt!'

Stage 3 is when people begin to doubt and question in Pro and wonder, 'Is it true that the spiritual gems accumulated throughout history actually have some

application to me?' And those questions lead one to go beyond the group, beyond the institution. Initially, we often feel extremely alone, as if we're the only one; but in time, we come to meet others who are searching on that journey, which is both personal and deeply universal.

The 4th stage very few people inhabit--Jesus is one of them--but we have these occasions of sort of glancing off or coming near to it, and that is the complete wholeness of life. This communion of life is made real-- we taste it, we know its truth and its depth. And for a few moments, or perhaps a season, we live inside of that absolute relationship with everything that is, knowing this overwhelming compassion is binding us together and supporting and nurturing the wholeness of life. Call it 'enlightenment', *satori*, *moksha*, or whatever you wish, it belongs to all of us.

The story we are hearing today in both Ezekiel and the gospel is about stages 2 and 3 transformation. One steps out of the crowd--this is a constant theme in the gospel of Mark--when they move in faith toward Jesus. We heard this in the story last week about the woman with the hemorrhaging for 12 years. She stepped out of the crowd in order to touch him--the hem of his garment--with faith.

Ezekiel's call today places him in tremendous opposition to, as God declares, the rebels who were the leaders of Israel. See, the rebels are not the outliers, not the troublemakers. The very leadership of the House of Israel, are the rebels, for they've abandoned the ways and teachings of God. It is amazing and also dangerous to cast ourselves as good people because the good people in leadership--with authority--can be as far away from God as those we tend to think of as abandoning the ways of God's teachings. The message of Ezekiel: 'Lament, dirges, OR grieve'.

Face the reality we are in and begin to mourn. As Jesus says in The Sermon on the Mount, 'Blessed are those who mourn, who feel the pain of this time, its brokenness and agony. They will be blessed with healing, with new understanding. But if you aren't experiencing it, or allowing it to touch your inner core, nothing changes. We continue in the world of pretense.

Paul speaks of a pain, his 'thorn in the flesh', which was painful, so much so that he prayed that it would be removed three times. Now, we to this day have no idea, no idea, what that actual 'thorn in the flesh' was for him--physical, psychological, otherwise--we don't know, but that he prayed to be rid of it, is crystal clear. The response he receives is one of the most profound in all of our scriptures: 'My grace is sufficient for you.' This thorn, whatever it was, was not a test, it was not a proving ground. It was not, *'How much can you endure, Paul?'* Rather, the teaching, blessing, received is, *'Rest and relax right where you are; I am with you.'*

It's been said that the earth is the most humble creature we will ever meet in our lifetimes, because the earth endures the trampling of everyone and everything, indiscriminately, and usually unconsciously. Still it holds us and all life, and encourages us in well-being. Humility is a mystery.

'My grace is sufficient. Let that hold your thorns.'

One of the themes I want to touch on the next couple Sundays is that of envy. Envy has been described in these two ways: *'Hate what you love, and love what you hate.'* It's confused; it doesn't know which way to turn. Or envy is described as, *'I will walk better if you have a broken leg. That would make me feel like I've improved.'* Crazy, isn't it? But that's how we human beings are.

Jesus has returned home to Nazareth. He is respected initially, for the local villagers find his wisdom astounding. But then, that quickly turns to despising him for it, rejecting him--like the rebels did in previous generations. They refuse the humility of, 'I don't know how he acquired these gifts, and why it speaks so deeply to me.' They refuse to rest in the grace of a profound moment. They are classic 'Stage 2 religionists', who reject the journey of others as they are trying to explore, 'How does the infinite compassion of God become real in my life?' They wanted to stay in the box of rules and everything prescribed for them, 'how you become a good person'.

And so they drive Jesus out for being different, for raising questions they didn't want to face. And Jesus, get this, could do nothing there, because Love--who is

God--can do nothing without our consent. If we don't open our hearts, nothing will change.

There is a simple little teaching, but it might be helpful in this regard. And that is to think of a piece of coal--

those letters C O A L.

Become Curious.

Open your heart.

A- Accept what is happening with awareness.

And L--Love the best you can.

C O A L.

Stay cool. Stay COAL. Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

[John and Mary Ellen Nowelsing and play 'I'm Just a Poor Wayfaring Stranger']

Let us pray for all those in need.

O God, shower your healing presence and blessings upon Brian, Karen, Doug, Dale, Bob, Ed, Margit, Stanley, Dana, Moriah, Maili, Marshall, Kyle, Fei, Lenny, Heather, Grant, Rodger, Cory, Mary, and Arlene.

In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Glory be to God, Abba Imma, Son, and Holy Spirit, and upon us weak and wounded people, upon us amazing and beautiful people.

May mercy and compassion be shed in both worlds, now and forever. Amen.

[Photo of fire pit on Labyrinth.]