

“For Power Is Made Perfect in Weakness”

Mark 6:1-13; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 Pentecost B: July 5, 2009

Buck Mountain Episcopal Church

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What are we here for?

Fresh back from vacation, and already I'm posing existential questions. Our week at the beach was wonderful, and part of its wonder was the opportunity to get some perspective. The perspective I bring back to you starts with that question: What are we here for?

I don't mean what are we, as humans, here for on the face of the earth. No, let's bring the question down in scale. What are we AS A CHURCH here for? What is the point of being Buck Mountain Episcopal Church?

Is our purpose to love and support one another? Yes, but that's not enough.

Is our purpose to take care of this beautiful building that has been handed down to us over the centuries, and to make worship available to all who wish to join us? Yes, but that's not enough.

Is our purpose to learn more about God, to praise him, and to find comfort in him? Yes, but -- you guessed it -- that's not enough either. In fact, add all three of these things together and you have only a partial picture of what a church should be.

Our church is supposed to be on the move. WE as Christians are supposed to be on the move.

Take a look at Jesus' instructions to the disciples in today's Gospel. First, notice that he is completely undaunted by his poor reception in his home town. Jesus seems neither surprised nor distressed at the rejection of his ministry by those who knew him best. Many leaders would recoil and recoup after being spurned so dramatically. Not Jesus.

Instead of licking his wounds or reconsidering his direction, Jesus acts. He goes out among the other villages -- letting his home town folk stew in their own juices -- he takes his message of life and love on the road. He knows how valuable the message is, and that the well-being of countless people depends on that message being here.

Then he sends out his disciples on their first mission without him. Is it possible he thought they weren't quite ready? It is highly LIKELY that he thought so. Is it possible that THEY thought they were not ready? You know they had to be trembling in their sandals!

It's one thing to hang with Jesus while he does the preaching ... it's another thing to preach yourself.

It's one thing to do crowd control so Jesus isn't overwhelmed ... it's another thing to fend off desperate people coming after you personally.

It's one thing to pray while Jesus does the healing ... it's another thing to do the laying on of hands yourself.

I can imagine the disciples quaking at the very thought of Jesus' mighty tall order.

But then he makes it even taller: He says, Travel lightly, depend on the kindness of strangers, don't get bogged down by rejection and failure. In other words, Jesus says to do ministry HIS way.

Well Lord, to be honest, all of this makes us mighty uncomfortable.

We have a profound experience of God in our lives, or we follow the tradition we have inherited and try to live by its rules. We come to understand that God is, or should be, at the center of our lives. And we try to respond to that understanding.

Often, we cling to the moment or the place or the situation in which God became the most real and the most comforting to us. In so doing, we might return repeatedly to a retreat house or vacation spot. Or we might put 90% of our effort into maintaining a precious church building where we felt God met us intimately. The human impulse to memorialize our moments closest to God has resulted in the creation of countless churches, shrines, and cathedrals, and I'm grateful for that.

But our Teacher, the Lord Jesus, doesn't see things that way. And those who follow him are expected -- in one way or another -- to leave the comfortable and the known behind to pursue the uncomfortable and the unknown.

The parishioners who took part in the Great Hot Dog Giveaway yesterday know a little bit about what this feels like. So do those of you who have delivered food to people in need or opened our food pantry or volunteered at Habitat for Humanity or PACEM or staffed our Open Church days or taught Sunday School ... or took part in so many other wonderful works of ministry that have come to characterize Buck Mountain Church.

But let me give you another example of what moving out in ministry might look like.

Guy and I have a friend in Wyoming -- I'll call her Mary, not her real name, because I'm going to share a couple of things about her background that are important to this story. Mary had a truly hellish childhood as the daughter of alcoholic and gambling-addicted parents who alternately abused and neglected her. Her parents did not believe in God. But Mary had an experience of God that changed her life. She was about 12 years

old, and her mother had done something especially horrible, and Mary felt totally alone and bereft, and she was lying in bed that night and said to whoever was listening: "God, if you're out there, please help me." She says today, 40-some years later, that she felt a giant, gentle hand cover her from head to toe, as well as a feeling of warmth and love.

Mary believed in God from that day forward, and she started going to church whenever and wherever she could. As with many people who experience severe abuse, Mary grew up to have a lot of emotional problems. She has struggled with wanting to kill herself. She has flashbacks of her abuse as a child and insists on sitting facing the door in any room – never with her back to it.

In recent years, Mary has found some healing, and she is happier than she has ever been. She is still a somewhat fragile person. But she has this desire to do something for the God who laid his hand on her when she was a child in agony. And so she has started a community support group, and she is serving her church in several capacities. And now she has a new idea: She wants to do ministry at a truck stop on Interstate 80 east of town.

Now I have to tell you, that is probably the LAST place I would want to be as a representative of Jesus. Not because truckers don't need and deserve the attention of Christian ministers. But that particular truck stop is in a remote, wind-scoured, ugly spot, and it is a haven for drug dealers and prostitutes and their customers, and I don't think I'd do very well relating to the truckers who come through there. But Mary was married to a trucker for about 10 years and traveled with him from coast to coast. It was an unhappy marriage, but Mary got to know the world of long-distance truckers. She is undaunted by the thought of hanging out at the truck stop and, in whatever way seems effective, preaching Christ to the truckers. She has found a couple of other Christ-besotted folks to do this with her. By the fall, Mary will be driving her old and rickety car out to the truck stop to offer her ministry to the truckers.

Is she ready? Is she prepared? Does she know how to handle every possible situation?

Of course not! In fact, there are some who might say Mary should avoid difficult places ... that her wellness depends on a reduction in stress, not an increase in it.

But Mary has been hanging around Jesus long enough to know better. She also knows that if she fails in this ministry, it won't be the end of the world, or of her faith. She knows that she MUST depend on Jesus and his Holy Spirit, and that on her own she wouldn't have much of a chance.

And that's the key to ministry in Christ's name: We do not depend on ourselves alone. Thank God! We need to know ourselves and have a somewhat realistic idea of our gifts and our weak points. And of course we can always learn and add skills to our ministry repertoires. But there's only one essential skill -- if you can call it a skill -- and that is absolute dependence on God.

Paul knew this. His famous words about "the thorn in the flesh" have puzzled Bible scholars for centuries. Many have pondered what this thorn might have been: a physical problem like arthritis? a mental problem like Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder? Most likely we will never know. What we do know is that this powerful healer could not find healing for the "thorn in the flesh."

In reading Paul, we encounter a complex person with a strong ego. It had to be very hard for him to live with this thorn of weakness, whatever it was. And yet it was THROUGH that very weakness that God spoke powerfully to Paul.

I have hung my hat on this scripture verse ever since I began teaching, preaching, and serving in the church. I started out VERY unsure of myself, very aware of my shortcomings. I was just a layperson with a Bachelor's degree in religion when I started preaching at Grace Church in Alexandria and working as a chaplain at a psychiatric hospital. I was woefully under-qualified in my own eyes. And so I depended daily on the truth of God's words to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." This is still my personal touchstone in ministry.

The most important skill we learn in ministry is to set aside our strengths and our powers and our abilities long enough to depend on God's. We do not spurn the abilities God has given us, but we do not count on our own competence to make things come out all right. We make room for the Holy Spirit, and we move boldly.

We don't worry too much about failure, because God will turn it to good.

We don't over-prepare or stress out over what we can't control, because God is our constant companion, and we have nothing to fear.

We don't hang around the places and situations where we met God personally, waiting to re-experience our mountaintop moments -- we move out onto the roads and into the byways, because that is what we have been called to do, and we will find God there as well as in our shrines and safe places.

What are we here for? Well, we are here to worship God and to love God and love one another, here in the context of Buck Mountain Church. But we are here also to be told to hit the road ... to go out into the world in witness to what the Lord has done for us, and what he promises to do for everyone who turns to him.

Are you ready? Of course you're not. And of course you are. "So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." No bread, no bag, no money in our belts -- empty-handed, except for the Holy Spirit of God, who will work in us, and through us, in ways we could never imagine, if we will only trust in the word of God. AMEN.