

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord, Jesus Christ.

I am grateful to preach this morning. When Tiffani sent July 7th as my date to preach, I was excited to take a look at the lectionary texts – that is, until I saw 2 Corinthians 12 and thought, “What in the third heavens!” My family and I just returned from Ouray, Colorado a week ago during which time we drove an ATV up Imogene Pass, just over 13,000 feet. To be honest, while I was up there, I thought, “I’m pretty sure we’re only a few miles short of the third heaven.” At one point I even heard, “My grace is sufficient for you.” And, listen, grace is wonderful, but I needed oxygen! Actually, I wasn’t scheduled to preach this week, but then Tiffani heard about my heavenly experience, and she knew I was qualified enough to speak to you today. I had come close enough for it to count.

Lauren and I have been having more focused discussions with our daughter, Joanna, about matters of faith and a life in the way of Jesus with an eye toward baptism for a little over a year now. Just a few weeks ago, Joanna commented to me, “Dad, you know, there are some who get baptized in order to receive some kind of personal gain from God, like maybe he’ll give them something extra.” (I don’t know which one of her Dayspring formation teachers I have to thank for this comment, but know I’m on the hunt.)

She continued, “But that seems a little selfish or self-seeking, and that doesn’t seem like Jesus to me. I just don’t think that is what it’s all about!” I think she may be on to something.

I think, maybe, Joanna has channeled her inner-apostle because Paul seems to have encountered some in Corinth whose wires have become a bit crossed. In somewhat of a tongue-in-cheek way, he labels them “super apostles.” For this group of Corinthian Christians, Paul, it appears, is just not apostle enough. He doesn’t have the same marks that they have. He doesn’t share the same extra-spiritual experiences. We’re talking about apostolic, here! We’re not talking about your run-of-the-mill, ordinary Christ follower. In a Jim Mora-esque voice, “Playoffs? Are you kidding me? Playoffs?” We might hear this group asking, “Apostle? Are you kidding me? Apostle?”

So Paul has come under added scrutiny and opposition in Corinth. His apostleship is in question. Does he really have the proper qualifications? Can we count him among the greats? Does he display the signs of true apostleship and true blessing? Christian? Yes. Apostle? Not likely. He can be a youth pastor. Maybe even an associate pastor. But a senior pastor? No chance. There’s just a little something lacking in Paul, in their analysis. He just doesn’t measure up. After all, he seems to have a lot of trouble following him around, and he carries a lot of burdens. I’m not so sure an apostle should be such a troublemaker. Has he even received a special vision or revelation from the Lord?

This is not unlike the early Puritan settlers of this new (though not-so-new and already occupied) land that will come to be known as these United States of America. There was a belief that, upon conversion, one would have some over the top, unmistakable “conversion experience.” There would most definitely be a story to tell of this moment. No experience? No conversion.

For these “super apostles” – no vision? No special revelation? No apostleship.

So Paul sees it as necessary to offer a bit of a defense in this letter, but it’s a really odd defense. You might expect, if Paul is going to defend his own apostolic status, he would offer an argument to refute their allegations. Instead, what he seems to do, at least initially, is solidify their argument – even offer them more firing power!

“You’re exactly right,” he says. “I *am* weak! I’ve been imprisoned and flogged nearly to death. I’ve been shipwrecked three times, kept in danger, in toil and hardships, gone hungry, thirsty, cold, and naked. I am all the things you say I am. In fact, it’s worse than that! As an apostle, the ‘most honored,’ you would think I would be the first over the city wall to seize it with the power of a new kingdom, like the most honored soldier. But, in Damascus, the governor under the king sought to seize me, and I had to be let down in a basket through an opening in the wall just to escape!”

At this point, we good Americans might like to grab Paul by the shoulders and shake him: “Paul, what are you doing?! Stand up for yourself! This is your credibility, your reputation!”

Then he says, “I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord,” and we’re either thinking, “Would you please,” or maybe, “Alright, here we go. Go get ‘em, Paul.”

“I knew a guy...” Really? Just *a guy*?

“...fourteen years ago.” Are you kidding me?

“He was caught up into the third heaven...into paradise, and he heard things...” Ooo, now you’re getting my attention. What did he hear?

“I can’t tell you....”

As though it is not pathetic enough already, it gets worse from there. It seems that Paul, or maybe another person in Christ (I do not know; God knows), attempted to ascend further but an angel of Satan stopped him and gave him a thorn that halted his progress. These kinds of accounts typically involve visions of the throne of God, but Paul’s does not. He tries, and it would seem he comes up short, yet again. It’s not just a pathetic vision. Some have claimed it is a failed ascent altogether.

If Paul is simply trying to defend his apostolic position, he’s done a really poor job of it up to this point. The thing is, I think Paul is doing more (or, perhaps, something other) than defending his own status. He’s really unconcerned with that. What Paul seems to be intent on is shaping their understanding of what it means to follow in the way of Jesus.

“You seem to think this way is about power and strength. You think it requires special visions and revelations? You think this is blessing or a sign of one who is honored in the kingdom? But I am telling you, that is not what it is about.”

I really think Paul may be pointing us back to chapter 4 and what he sees as the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. In our gospel reading this morning, we heard of some from Jesus’ own village who, when gazing upon the face of Christ, the glory of God, all they saw was Joseph’s and Mary’s boy...without honor among his own people. And for Paul to share in such dishonor, he believes, is a clear image of God’s grace and Christ’s power. For Paul, this is the kingdom!

The kingdom of God is not a way of grandeur, personal gain, influence, and strength. The kingdom is trusting a sufficient grace in the midst of personal failures and hardships. It is faithfulness in the midst of suffering. It is the power of God made complete in the embrace of weakness.

This is what Paul has come to see in his own life and his own experiences, and it is the glory of God in the very face of Christ.

The truth is, to be an apprentice of Jesus, to become co-workers with God, we must begin to see our own world and our lives within it in a similar way. This will require us to first become reoriented to a broader perspective of effectiveness in the kingdom.

We seem to have built within us this desire to accomplish something big, and it needs to be accomplished when? Well, now would be great, but within our lifetimes, at least. And there are things that need to change. At times, though, I am so bound by my own time and place that it becomes difficult for me to draw back and see how even my

routine, daily life – this ordinary time – can and is bringing about the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Sometimes I'm tempted to think:

- "I've got to work an impactful job to be effective in the kingdom." No...I don't.
- "I really need to go on a grand adventure, take a missionary trip, or participate in a pilgrimage." No, I don't.
- In this season of justice and peace, "Am I really effecting kingdom change and pursuing justice and peace if I'm not actively trying to impact legislation?" Is that enough? Am I doing enough?

I asked Joanna recently what she expects to happen after baptism. Does she expect to suddenly have some kind of super power to help her avoid making poor decisions or to protect her from harm? Does she expect to feel differently? What does she expect? She simply responded, "You just keep living life, but now you do it dedicated to Jesus. And that changes things."

But this requires a broader perspective, to see that my small being here and now, my little mustard seed, yeast in dough faithful acts, are actually effective in the kingdom. God is doing something right where you are, and he is inviting you to join him in making all things new, right where you are.

I think at first, this sounds maybe a little romantic, but we shouldn't downplay that this will also require something else. It will require us to learn to share in the dishonor of the peaceful rejected one. It is not through some grand gesture, special vision, or revelation that God is making all things new but through a peaceful, suffering savior. It is not through political influence or the strife for power but through the body of Christ broken. It is not through coercion or a militaristic show of force but through the blood of Christ poured out. It requires suffering, self-giving love. It requires a trust in the sufficient grace of Christ, even in the face of death.

And if we can come to terms with this, even come to participate in it, we too might just come to see the glory of God in the very face of Christ, the appearance of which may surprise us. It may look like:

- A prophet not welcomed among his own people;
- A devoted disciple being shamefully let down in a basket through a wall, facing his own lashings, shipwrecks, hunger, and a failed ascent to see the throne of God;
- Or perhaps it looks like something as ordinary as a husband and wife each day practicing forgiveness and reconciliation, though, let's be honest, they're not always feeling like it (exhaustion sets in after a long day of work, the kids are being difficult, finances are tight, and somebody has to fix dinner);
- Or a mother and father working a simple 8-5 in order to have time together and with their children;
- Or perhaps it looks like something as extraordinary as a single mother or a pregnant mother leaving everything behind to travel to an unknown place, facing innumerable dangers to protect her child;
- Or a little church on Renewal Way with a tiny garden and humble compost bin set on caring at least for its own little part of creation;
- Or Elise Edwards speaking the courageous, powerful, and suffering words on pursuing racial justice she preached last week in that beautiful little church;
- Or a little house in the heart of a small city, named Naomi. Naomi – a helpless widow who was cared for by another helpless widow.

You know, perhaps this all seems a little pathetic. Maybe even a little weak.

Or maybe it is the kingdom of God coming in our midst, God's strength through human weakness. Maybe it is the glory of God in the face of Christ right here with us. And maybe, just maybe, this is what it is actually about.

Thanks be to God.