

"Sufficient Grace"

They had been waiting for him in Nazareth. Finally Jesus returned home. They had heard that, after his meeting with John the Baptist, mysterious things happened to him: heaven had opened, a voice had been heard, and then he disappeared into the desert. It was said that John the Baptist stopped baptizing because of him. Then Jesus went about healing the sick and crippled, chasing away evil spirits, and changing water into wine, so the story went.

They all went to the synagogue in Nazareth that day to see him. He sat down with them; he stood up with them. He listened, he sang hymns, he prayed with them; it was as if he had never been away. It was the same old thing wasn't it?

They knew him. Despite all the reports they had heard about his ministry elsewhere, they knew him. The rumor around town for years was that he might not even be Joseph's son. He disappeared for days in Jerusalem when he was 12 - a sure sign of disobedience and unreliability. Now he shows up in his home town and tries to work miracles. Shucks, they know who he is. A leopard can't change spots; an old dog can't learn new tricks. Trouble is, Jesus, and you and I, are not old dogs.

We put people in their places, including ourselves, and most stay. There's little room left for change; certainly not the kind God brings. Life bumps along as before, and most want it that way. It's mighty hard to answer God's call at home.

It says he could do no great works there among his own people. Maybe they didn't think God would do anything out of the ordinary. Maybe they thought they were good enough already and didn't need God among them. Maybe they wouldn't admit any weaknesses that would need God's touch. They were all closed up into themselves. People are a lot like that aren't they? Can he do great works here, among us?

[Most of us do everything we can to ensure that we are strong enough to withstand any of the rigors that life may unexpectedly throw at us. We take out insurance against physical calamities, and we are likely to lay blame for our accidents and to seek compensation for them from somebody else. This "insurance attitude" can spill over into every aspect of life. Many of us like to make plans for the future. But if our plans are too well laid we can become a victim of our own success, for there's little room for God to suddenly do a new thing.]

St. Paul, the writer of the letters to the Corinthians which we have in the Bible, met the risen and Christ and was compelled to do a new thing - to change his life direction.

He wrote to the church he founded in Corinth that in his afflictions God had spoken to him, "...he said to me 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" His grace is sufficient. Paul was well aware of his own human limitations and frustrations, as he indicated many times in his letters. It is not surprising that when he was somewhat "carried away" in his claims of spiritual experiences (in his attempts to counteract the boastings of the "spirit-filled" Christian enthusiasts of Corinth), he was reminded of his human limitations, of his "thorn in the flesh" as he called it. All of us have our human limitations, of which each of us is painfully aware.

This 4th of July Celebration reminds us our nation's history. Those who signed the Declaration of Independence, and later approved the Constitution were convinced that human rights derive from God, not government, or rulers. They had witnessed and suffered the oppressions of

government by human fiat - the king of England. John Hancock admonished the new nation, "Continue steadfast and, with a proper sense of your dependence on God, nobly defend those rights which heaven gave, and no man ought to take from us."

The founders were also well aware of their human limitations and those of the people of the newly formed nation. They knew that their vision of a republic, with a government of the people, by the people, for the people, could only work if the people recognized divine authority. George Washington advised, "While we are zealously performing the duties of good citizens and soldiers, we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of our Christian character." Freedom and rights must be balanced with a reverence for the Giver of freedom.

Without God and the moral guidance found in God, this republic would descend into despotism. Some of the founders of this nation feared mob rule as much as they detested dictatorship. People must have a reverence or fear of God in order to govern themselves. True freedom comes from faith in God. "Now the Lord is Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:7). True freedom is rooted in a relationship to God. The corollary of this is that a nation which strays from God will eventually lose freedom.

God's word -- especially God's word of forgiveness, of resurrection, and of salvation - sets us free. St. Paul wrote (2 Corinthians 12:9), "The Lord has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in your weakness,' " In spite of everything that may happen to us, God's grace is sufficient, and even perfected in our weakness.

His grace is always sufficient, but never domineering. Jesus didn't do it in Nazareth and he won't do it here. He won't force his grace on anyone who doesn't want it or isn't ready for it. To be ready means to obey to him. It doesn't mean surrendering your will. You must have a will to live; without a will you're not alive. What he asks is that we *will* to obey him.

That's because the one, true, living God is not just a pliable, warm, caregiver, but a powerful, leader who has expectations of us and makes demands on you and me. The miracles happen when we are ready to trust and obey God. His grace is sufficient.

There is a lot of preaching, in the name of Christ that just preaches God's love and compassion. That's good; it's a necessary beginning. But if it stops just there it's not good news, for it will not offer sufficient grace. Without repentance, without obedience to Jesus, it's only cheap grace, with no hope for the long run. His grace is sufficient when we turn to him, admitting we can't make all the decisions on our own.

So what is the outlook for us? We have challenges before us; the future is uncertain. But how is that much different from other times. We can't get discouraged or angry when our resources don't match our ideas. Look, if we obey him and run into problems, they are Christ's opportunities. If we avail ourselves of his guidance, repent of our own desire to control all of it, the church will thrive. Remember: Jesus said, "I will build my church." He didn't say "your" church. He didn't ask us to build a once-for-all-time institution, but to be his church; flexible and growing, in order to share his good news with each new generation. It's His church after all. He can take care of it, build it, we just need to lift him up. His grace is sufficient. We need more of our people here to step up to God's expectations; to do their part and then some. This means we need more prayer right now, which will tap us in to our greatest resource, Christ himself. It works; I've seen it. Then we need to act on his directions.

Didn't Jesus send out his disciples to preach and teach, heal and chase away evil spirits? All 100% of his disciples are allowed to serve. Not all are called to be evangelists, but all are called to testify to their

faith in Jesus Christ as Savior; sometimes with words, more often with actions and in relationships. What about you? Do you know yourself to be sent into this world to show forth Christ? Do you feel how God can use you to bring about change and healing in your community?

We might want to be careful not to apply Jesus' word to "shake off the dust" of unreceptive places too literally. In most settings it takes years of hard work with decades of resistance to the gospel -- and martyrdom at times -- before the first signs of response begin to appear. Paul's calling was to move from place to place, planting the seed of the gospel, and seldom spending more than a few months to a couple of years in one place. But unless there had been others who came to stay and persisted through good times and bad, the mission of the early church would have dried up. Let Jesus decide when it's time to move on.

Close to home it's often more difficult to be a disciple of Christ than far away. With family and friends we want to show forth Christ's love, but they see through us. They know all our weaknesses. Don't think you can handle it? So pray, for his power. God answers, "My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness." (II Cor. 12:9)

Maybe the greatest miracle is to recognize the power of God at work in ordinary lives: carpenter from Nazareth, a disabled rabbi from Tarsus, a friend or relative who tells us how his life was changed by Christ.

The time is now, let's not let it slip by. The time is ripe for your life to be energized by Christ. The time is ripe for sharing the hope of Jesus Christ with the next generations. We're in the midst of a building project - it's a great time to invite someone. You can say, "Look, this church is going somewhere. We believe in Christ's power. We're stepping into the future." When is the last time you were able to do that? Or maybe invite them to hear about new life in Christ at this church? Don't think you can handle it? God answers, "My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness." (II Cor. 12:9)