

PENTECOST 7B 2024
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
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Every seminarian hears words describing their future task, words which combine opposites into a single purpose. “Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.”

Such is the case with the Apostle Paul in today’s Epistle lesson. It’s part of the second known letter from Paul to the church he founded in one of the more wealthy and sophisticated cities of his known world. Yet, Paul faces opposition from others, and we know some are itinerant preachers who either teach something different from what Paul taught, or might even use words to denigrate Paul himself. There may be some professional rivalry going on, or perhaps simply different understandings of the same message.

Whatever it is, Paul questions the faithful in Corinth about their doubt in him. He seems to have heard of the boasting of his rivals, and claims that he can boast about himself much more, but doesn’t want to do that. It’s almost like saying “it goes without mentioning” just before you go ahead and do the mentioning anyway.

So Paul tells a story. It’s about a “friend” (wink, wink) who was taken up to the heavens where the “friend” heard and saw things that cannot, or must not be described. And to keep from boasting about this so-called relationship, Paul reminds his readers that he’s talking about a “friend.” Wink. Wink.

What he doesn’t say is that he dares his rivals to beat that one, and even if they can, Paul reminds everyone that boasting isn’t what it’s all about anyway. This is not an “I win, you lose” proposition. Paul’s gospel, his message to all the churches, is that in Christ, all are made winners, if we must use that word at all. And, Paul would say, we are made winners by the one exposed to the world as the biggest loser of them all.

Jewish tradition speaks of one who is crucified as being an abomination to God. However we look at the cross, we are reminded of that teaching while also remembering who we say died that way. Talk about comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. Usually the same person at the same time. Understanding the what of the cross while accepting the why is perhaps just one of the thorns in our own side.

There is some comfort in knowing that Paul, and even Jesus sometimes had difficulty getting their work done. Today’s Gospel lesson is also told by Luke, who says that Jesus angered the people of Nazareth to the point that they wanted to throw him off a cliff. So instead of all the wonderful miracles they might have expected from the hometown boy made good, Jesus meets their consternation with what was probably even then a well-worn saying: “A prophet is not without honor save in his own

country.” Then he moves on to more fertile soil in which to sow the seeds of good news. And he tells his disciples that moving to fertile soil might also mean making sure you don’t carry the, um, fertilizer of others with you.

We are the recipients of these words. Can we hear them for what they say, not just some two thousand years ago, but today, without rejecting them because they make us uncomfortable? Or will we get defensive and say with the people of Nazareth, “Just who does he think he is?”

We are taught to present ourselves from a position of strength. We adore those things that project strength, whether it be the kind of house we live in, the car we drive, the trophies on the mantles, the pictures of well-dressed and smiling families taken well before the metaphorical gravy is sent flying across the Thanksgiving table. Personally, I’d like to see the slide show or at least a travel guide from Paul’s friend’s trip to the third heaven. Alas, for now I’ll have to let my imagination provide that.

We’re not so quick to own the thorns in our own side, despite our tendency to identify them if they are something or someone “other.” Paul’s difficulty may be known to the Corinthians, but we don’t have a clue despite centuries of speculation. And it doesn’t matter. Because the thorn we need, the discomfort we require so often, is a reminder that God is God, and we are not God.

Paul’s last statement in today’s lesson says more than words on a page. After boasting somewhat about not boasting, and being rather cryptic about some difficulty, Paul says what really matters.

You see, the story we have to tell isn’t really about us. We’re not here to market ourselves as the biggest, bestest parish in the diocese. We’re here to tell those around us about Christ, and to be the body of Christ that continues to provide healing for the many afflictions of our time.

We don’t always know how to do that. But, like Paul, when we are weak

We don’t like to consider our weaknesses. Yet, when we consider our strengths, we often find hidden inside them our weakest points. Consider Paul’s “when I am weak, then I am strong.” Our strength in weaknesses comes from those two words, “I am.” I AM is what Moses heard from the burning bush. “I am” so many things to you, Jesus tells us in John’s Gospel.

Scripture is filled with stories of weakness being overcome by the presence of the one who said *ehyeh-asher-ehyeh*, “I will be what I will be.” And so, in weakness we find ourselves amazed that the One who spoke those words to Moses is with us, joining our true selves in times when we are most human.

It’s time to stop imitating the people of Nazareth or any rivals to the good news that may be close by. It’s time to admit and own our weakness, and to be comforted by the nearness of the One who said to Moses, *ehyeh-asher-ehyeh*, and identified himself so many times in John’s Gospel, *ego eimi*. I AM. And let God be who God will be so that

God's work shown to us through Christ Jesus might stay with us, calling us his home, completing his work among us.