

Sermon: Made Perfect in Weakness

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles PC, joint service, July 4, 2021)

A local newspaper in the Cambridge Minnesota area once printed this correction: “Isanti County Commissioner Tom Pagel has 100 percent support from his family, not 10 percent, as was stated in last week's article on Pagel's announcement to seek re-election.” Evidently, strong family support is critical to the success of one's career in politics. A careless omission of a ‘zero’—in this case of 10 from 100 percent—would be a complete disaster, from a public relation point of view. A correction must be made so that the general public would not have any lingering doubt when they are asked to vote, to put their trust in even a minor political official such as a county commissioner—he has one hundred percent support from his family, not ten! One hundred percent!

With that in mind, I wonder what percentage of support would one need from his family, his hometown, when running for the title of ‘Messiah’ of a beleaguered nation long awaiting for a miraculous deliverance?

The story of the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth, his hometown, is well documented in the Synoptic Gospels, with no retraction nor correction. Though minor details differ such as placement of the story within the life of Jesus, or reasons given for the rejection, nonetheless it is clear that the ministry of Jesus was not accepted by those in his hometown, his neighbour and closest kin, those who knew him best, those who grew up with him—“*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?*” (Mark 6:3).

According to the arrangement by the author of Mark, when Jesus entered into the synagogue of Nazareth on that particular sabbath, he had already garnered quite a reputation elsewhere as a healer, a teacher, a miracle worker. Jesus had healed a man with a shrivelled hand, cast out impaired spirits, calmed a raging storm, taught many with authority, restored a demon possessed man, healed a woman suffering from hemorrhages, and raised a dead girl to life. Jesus had gathered quite a following, large crowds everywhere he went. Jesus had also called to himself the Twelve, disciples who would follow him closely for three years, being shaped and molded by the ultimate guru. By all objective measures, Jesus had gone viral, he was trending up, he was friended, shared and

liked with two thumbs up. Then, he returned to Nazareth his hometown, the place where he grew up, then it all kind of went to the toilet.

The author of Mark did not care much about what Jesus actually taught at that synagogue, he cared more about the reaction it provoked from those gathered, "*Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!*" (Mark 6:2). After questioning his family background, not the strangeness but the closeness of it, they took offense at him. One could say: familiarity breeds contempt.

In an honour/shame society such as that of 1st century Palestine, it would be unthinkable, a sheer act of pure arrogance for someone like Jesus to speak out publicly, to assume that he is in a position to teach. From the point of view of the townspeople, Jesus was after all just a common ordinary fellow who makes his living with his hands, just like the rest of us. Jesus did not receive any formal education, he was not taught by a reputable rabbi with a good pedigree.

Furthermore, the rhetorical question of "Isn't this Mary's son?" should really be seen as derogatory, since it is not in the Jewish custom to refer to a man as the son of his mother, unless there was and continued to be doubt about his illegitimacy at birth. From the point of view of the townspeople, Jesus really should just keep quiet, whatever the message that could be compelling, it was being delivered by the wrong messenger.

Let's not be fooled by the nonchalant response of Jesus, "*Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.*" Prophets in the Hebrew Scripture faced constant rejection and persecution. Jeremiah most notably was marked for death by people of his hometown of Anathoth (Jeremiah 11:21), most likely due to his support of Josiah's reform that resulted in the closure of the village sanctuary at Anathoth. The rejection that Jesus faced by those at Nazareth was no different than those faced by a long line of biblical prophets. Yet, something was materially different. Jesus was amazed at their unbelief because that lack of faith seemed to have thwarted him from doing deed of power, except for curing a few sick people by laying on his hands.

I won't go into more details on what theologians have to say about the relationship between miracle and faith, but I will point out what Jesus had said previously, "*If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.*" (Mark 3:24-25). Facing the rejection of his closest kin, if one

could ask Jesus to honestly self-assess his own effectiveness in ministry, he would probably give himself a 'F' as in a big 'FAIL'. Walking out of Nazareth being spurned marked a real low point in the ministry of Jesus.

Apostle Paul was no stranger to rejection and persecution. In chapter 11 of his 2nd Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul described in graphic details of ordeals he had to endure for the sake of the Gospel:

"Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches." (2 Con. 11:24-28)

Then in chapter 12, Paul describes another kind of rejection: "a thorn was given me in the flesh". Paul calls it "a messenger of Satan to torment me". He understands its purpose was to keep him from being too elated, too full of himself. Three times he prayed to the Lord to have this thorn removed, yet God only replied, "**My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.**"

Being rejected by others is one thing, but being rejected by God is something altogether. Yet Paul endured and persevered. His life demonstrated that endurance is not a desperate hanging on but a traveling from strength to strength. The way of faith is not walking on tight rope, fearing any misstep or stumble, rather the way of faith is trusting totally in God, in God's provision of grace being entirely sufficient. Often, it is where we have come to the end of ourselves, that we start to experience the beginning of God. Often, it is in our own weakness, that the power of God is manifested, made perfect.

As the Canada emerges out of the pandemic (Oh God, I get a chill just by saying these words), I get the sense that Christian ministry is at a low point. For the past 16 months, congregations across the country had to find creative ways just to survive. With the aide of modern technology, faith communities are being sustained through tools such as email, Zoom, Facebook, and YouTube. Faithfulness is being expressed in very different

ways, and I am not sure it is for the better. I am even less certain that once congregations begin to re-open, worshippers will flock back to the church.

For the past four weeks during the month of June, I've been preaching on the topics of healing and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of Canada. Partly spurred on by the discovery of the 215 unmarked graves near the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. Partly spurred on by my own realization that I need to learn more of this ministry of reconciliation as the relationship between peoples and between communities are far from settled. As the news of more unmarked graves begin to emerge (now to thousands in various locals), churches begin to be burned, set afire deliberately. In the last two weeks, seven church buildings have perished, mostly Catholic but one Anglican as well. Even St Giles has received additional instruction from our insurer to review our fire safety protocols.

For the record, I am disturbed by the delay from the Pope in offering a formal apology to survivors of residential schools. I am disgusted by the refusal of the Catholic Church to fulfill its outstanding agreement to compensate victims, while fundraising and spending millions to build spanking new cathedrals. It is tone death and spiritually suspect. It may primarily be a Catholic problem, but I suspect the other Christian denominations will not escape unscathed from this dark chapter in history.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, but for the first time ever, I am not proud of being identified as a clergy of the Christian church. I wouldn't call it persecution or rejection, but the Christian ministry, in my opinion, is in a truly weakened state. Yet, the grace of God is sufficient, for the power of God is made perfect in our weakness.

Perhaps we could take comfort and learn from the example of Jesus. After he was booted out of Nazareth, he continued going about among the villages, still teaching, still healing. He then gathered the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. It is interesting how Jesus instructed them (and us) on what to bring: "take nothing for [your] journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in [your] belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics." (Mark 6:8-9) In summary, sisters and brothers: **pack light, travel light, shed away what you think would protect, and trust in God to provide.**

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.