

Sermon: Power in Weakness

(Preached by the Rev. Paul We, joint service at St. Giles, July 7, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Ever since when I was little, I was always fascinated with Kung Fu. No, I did not learn from a real master, though I wished I had. I did, however, pick up a few booklets, purported to show readers how to learn the Chinese martial arts, DIY style. I may have learned a few moves, but can't really honestly say that I know Kung Fu. Of course I like Bruce Lee. Who wouldn't? But his flamboyant personality and his brash fighting style is a bit over the top. I much prefer that TV series back in the 70's, titled simply as "Kung Fu".

The series follows the adventures of a Shaolin monk, played by David Carradine, who travels through the American Old West, righting wrongs, upholding justice, armed only with wisdom from his old master, and training in the martial arts.

There is this one scene, when the young Carradine, nicknamed by his master as 'grasshopper', was challenged to take a pebble from the master's hand. He couldn't do it initially—too young, too inexperienced and too slow. But as he grew, as he was trained properly and learned from the old master, he became wiser, faster. So finally one day, he successfully snatched the pebble from his master's hand, the master looked on his pupil with satisfaction, and said, "Time for you to leave. Remember always, the wiseman walks with his head bow."

That was the final lesson for the young grasshopper, as he was sent out into the world on his own. Wonderful and most memorable scene, which makes me wonder: What final lesson did Jesus offer to his disciples before sending them off into the world?

The lectionary reading today of Mark 6 gives us a clue. Right from the beginning of this gospel, Jesus has been preaching the good news of the coming kingdom of God, as in Mark 1:15, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and beloved in the good news.*"

Jesus called and appointed the Twelve, healed the sick, drove out unclean spirits, taught in parables, calmed a storm, and everywhere he went, people flocked to him for they were amazed at his power and the way

he teaches with authority. But now, Jesus faces his greatest challenge yet, he goes back to his hometown, not where he was born but where he grew up, back to Nazareth.

On a sabbath day, he went into a synagogue and began to teach. The people in his hometown, his kins were initially astounded, for they said, “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!”

But that initial enthusiasm didn't last long, and doubt soon crept in, “Isn't 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?” They could probably still recall his rebellious teen years, remember his bumbling effort to pick up carpentry, and recount all the troubles Jesus had gotten himself into, his warts and all. These townsfolk were probably thinking that Jesus is but one of us, not in an endearing way, but in a dismissive way: he is nothing but one of us. And here is the key phrase, “they took offence at him!”

The Greek word for taking offence is *skandalizó*. It's a scandal! This son of Mary, a poor carpenter—poor in both skill and wealth—has now the gall to come back and pretend to teach us, with authority? Who does he think he is? He is not a rabbi, he is a pretender! Scandalous, absolutely offensive! This Greek word *skandalizó*, can also be translated as ‘causing to stumble’. As Jesus teaches elsewhere, “Blesses is anyone who does not stumble on account of me” (Luke 7:23). Sadly, stumbled they did—his kins, folks in his hometown, on the account of Jesus.

Facing such an outright rejection, Jesus calmly said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown and among their own kin and in their own house.” Invoking the tradition of rejected prophets we see elsewhere in the Old Testament, this rejection of Jesus forces us to reflect on why we serve God? Is it for our own honour or glory? I hope not. It forces us to consider to what extent are we prepared to go in service to the Lord? Do we have what it takes to go the distance? Could we persist despite objection or ridicule, even from those closest to us? Or will we fold at the first sign of trouble?

The author of Mark tells us that Jesus persisted, but he could do no deed of power there, except maybe curing a few sick people, for he was amazed at their unbelief. What really interests me, in so far as how Mark arranges his gospel narrative, that is right after this rejection, when Jesus

was apparently at his lowest, his weakest, the polar opposite of triumph, Jesus sends out his disciples.

Instead of retreating to the wilderness, licking his wound, spending some time wrestling with God in prayer, Jesus, surprisingly sends out the twelve. He sends them out two by two, offering support, encouragement and accountability to each other. He instructs them to travel light, with a staff, no bread, no bag, no money, wearing sandals but no extra shirt. Jesus is teaching them to trust God, to rely not on oneself but solely on God's provision. He tells the disciples to stay at whoever welcomes them, learning to give as well as to receive the graciousness of others. But if any place will not welcome or listen to them, the disciples are to leave that place, with a simple gesture of shaking the dust off their feet, as a testimony against them.

What Jesus was doing is to prepare his disciples for the eventual rejection that is bound to follow as one does the will of God. Just as it had happened to Jesus, it will surely follow the followers of Jesus. A student is not above his teacher, wherever true Gospel is preached, resistance follows.

However, here is a theological truth we can affirm, a take-away lesson for today: **There is power in weakness.** Rejection of the messenger does not impede the message. The kingdom of God is coming and is near. God can and does use rejection to further God's kingdom.

Much has been said about the narrative of decline of the Christian Church in the West for the past fifty years. You don't need me to remind you, or to describe the impact of secularism on congregational lives, as many of you have lived through it all.

I still recall attending the graduation ceremony of the Knox College in 2006, not my year but the cohort before me. The keynote speaker was Douglas John Hall, the famed Canadian theologian, Montreal based I believe, and the author of a number of books, including "The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity." In that graduation address, Hall painted an absolutely gloomy picture of the state of Christendom, and the future of congregational ministry. He stated in no uncertain term to that crop of future Presbyterian ministers, that they had made a terrible career choice, that there may not even be a church left by the time all is said and done, and they are looking to retire.

I recall thinking at the time, when is Professor Hall going to get to the good stuff, the hopeful stuff of trusting in God, of waiting upon God—the

way his book ends. But he never got there. It was doom and gloom and more gloom. I don't think any of my classmates walked out of that graduation speech uplifted. Quite the opposite, we were all literally and spiritually dejected, as we were about to be sent out into the world like lamb to the slaughter. A few of us got together for a beer, and to vent a little. It was cathartic actually, but we had to also remind ourselves and to remind each other, of why we had answered God's call, and who is actually doing the sending—It is God Almighty and Christ the King.

We are servants, yes, not of people, but of God, and we seek not our own honour or glory, but seeking only that the kingdom of God is preached everywhere and always.

The disciples were sent out by Jesus. "*They went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cure them.*" (v.12-13). Faith is not based on one's accomplishment, but a gift of the Holy Spirit. There is power in weakness for we are but broken vessels with a priceless treasure inside each of us—that is the good news of Jesus Christ. Messengers may be rejected, but the message lives on.

In another sending story, as recored in Luke 10, seventy-two disciples of Jesus were sent out by the Lord with similar instructions. This time, they returned, absolutely breaming with joy, perhaps even bragging a bit, saying "*Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!*" Jesus reminded them, in verse 20, "*Do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*"

May those who have ears, let them hear!

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