

It is good growing up in a small town, knowing everyone and being known by them. There are no strangers in a small town, each face you see has a name, a history, a family. And sometimes that can be come a trap. What you did when you were ten or twenty or thirty or forty is not forgotten, even if you wish it could be. Older people still remind you what it was like to hold you as a baby, of your antics as a teenager. But most of all comes that feeling that no one can change in a small town, that who and what you were yesterday is what you are expected to be today. You have a place, a niche, and there you must fit.

It was ⁱⁿ a small town that Jesus grew up, everyone knew him, they had watched as he had run screaming to his mother when he had fallen and skinned his knee, they had watched him playing games with the other children, sometimes winning sometimes losing, they had seen him learn to become a carpenter, his successes, his mistakes. They knew him well. And though they never said it, they could have told you what his life would look like, he would work, he would marry, he would have a family, he would grow old, he would die. Like every other small town carpenter, he would do what so many had done before him, and someday die; the greatest monument to his life, the shops and houses he would build, the children he would raise.

But somewhere something went wrong. I nstead of settling down, getting married, raising a family, ^{Jesus} he had taken to wandering from town to town, teaching about God, there were even reports that he was performing miracles. Seemed like he was getting too big for little Nazareth, too important to do an honest days work. Well he might be able to fool some of the people, but not the people in his home town. A teacher, a miracle worker, he was just little Jesus, a poor boy from a poor family, certainly no teacher, certainly with no special connections to God. He might be able to get by impressing people in the big cities, but ^{in Nazareth} ~~here~~ ^{they} really knew him.

So it was that Jesus came to Nazareth, came to their place of worship and began to teach. And they were amazed, astonished at what he taught. "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands? Yes they were astonished, But what they could see and hear could not convince them that what they had known all along was not true. No matter what he said, he was a carpenter, from a very common family. They took offense at him, they rejected him, they did not believe.

A pastor preaches a sermon, a congregation listens. They have come to hear God's word, to hear God speaking to them, but what do they see, a man. A man whom they saw on the street during the week who never even spoke to them, a man whom they had seen get angry over nothing the week before that, a man who certainly ~~do~~ ^{do} not understand hard work or business, what life ~~was~~ ^{is} really like. And seeing only a man, they hear ^{only a man's opinions,} ~~what they would describe as his opinions,~~ hoping they will not be too bored by what they hear, hoping it will not take too long.

A non-Christian visits a church for the first time, over there he sees the couple whose marriage is falling apart, next to them the man he saw down at the bar late Saturday night, on the other side the woman who is always shouting at her children, behind her the member of the school board or city council with whom he has had a runin. And there sits the business man who charges too much, who is getting rich off all the rest. And this visitor thinks to himself, if these are the Christians, I don't want to be one.

A woman goes to a circle meeting, seeking love and caring and closeness, and finds instead a group of women upset over all ~~their~~ ^{they are} being asked to do. Arguments about how to decorate a room, over who will do the work, about where the money will come from. Women upset because more are not there, because the same ones always have to lead the Bible Study or host the circle. And this visitor instead of finding the love and the caring she seeks, the quiet listening she needs, has her ears filled with harsh criticisms and angry comments.

Is this the body of Christ, does such a weak and sinful man preach the word of God, can it be that in such a congregation and only in ~~such~~ a congregation that ~~one can~~ ^{one can} come to know and experience the living God? For one on the outside looking in, for one who knows us all too well, what could be more ridiculous. And they took offense at this Body of Christ, they did not believe.

Our God has taken an enormous risk, he has made a great investment in human flesh and blood. Sending his Son, a common, ordinary human being, a baby, a child, a man, God has chosen to reveal himself, to be present in the common, in the ordinary, in human life. Those people of Nazareth would have welcomed a heavenly messenger, an angel glowing pure and bright, but a dusty, common man, how could it be that God had come in him? They heard his teaching, they marveled at the reports of the mighty works, but finally could see only the man, the man they must reject. Yet God did not stop there, the risk continued, as he chose to come ~~through~~

every generation in the common and the ordinary, through water, through bread and wine, through the witness of a people who were the continuing presence of this human Son in this world, the Body of Christ. Through weak and sinful preachers, through people who fail and offend, through groups in which there is conflict and turmoil. Why this great risk, why did God not create us a people of super faith, a people who know no sin, a people in all things perfect?

The Apostle Paul must have asked himself that question. In Romans he writes that the good he wants to do he does not do, that the evil he so wants to avoid he does. He writes, "Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through ~~sinners~~ Jesus Christ our Lord." Not through perfection, but through his own sin, through the awareness of that sin, Paul came to trust and rely on God, and what God had done in Jesus Christ.

So also in our second lesson for today, we read of Paul involved in a different kind of struggle. He speaks of a thorn in the flesh, was it epilepsy, was it severe depression, was it headaches, eye trouble, we don't know. We do know that three times Paul prayed that the affliction might leave him, and the answer he received from God? "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" Paul's weakness forced him to grasp hold of God's power, to trust in ^{God} him, to rely on ^{God} him.

But let's bring this closer to home. This past week I talked with a member of this congregation who told me of the time she was hospitalized for a long period. Lying in that bed, she was angry with God, she asked that question, "Why me." Yet in that time she slowly learned the truth about herself, and her life. She discover just how great her power over her own life was as she could not even reach over to the table for a glass of water. She could do nothing, others had to do everything, and in her weakness she received the same answer as Paul, "My grace is sufficient." In weakness she learned what it was to trust in, to rely on to depend upon God. ^{For we would ~~possibly~~ think we had no need of God's} Were we a people of super faith, with no conflict, no weaknesses, no sin, would we know God? Therefore our God makes himself known in the human, in the common, in our weakness, that he might truly be our God. He comes to us in the weakness of the cross, he speaks to us through weak and sinful men and women, He is present in the Body of Christ, the gathering of these people, ^{whose faith we know so well.}

All this our God has done that we might discover that he is the answer, the only true

and certain hope for our life. Not some supernatural preacher whom we could believe in
but God, not ~~some~~ in trying harder to conquer our sins and temptations but trusting in the
one who is the conqueror, not in seeking to find some perfect human community but ~~the~~
trusting in the one who calls us into this community, not in seeking the ones who could
heal our bodies and protect us from death, but resting in the arms of him who has true power
whether in life or in death. In the common, in the ordinary, in the weakness, in our sin,
we are led to this one that we might also learn, "My grace is sufficient. ^{God's} ~~our~~ grace is
sufficient, his free gift of love is sufficient for us. Amen.

God's power by not over-achieving
God's power in the ordinary - simple living
Paul - know that your strength is hidden

Ordinary