

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus be yours this day. The title for today’s sermon is “Sufficient Grace”, and is based on the Epistle reading from 2nd Corinthians, chapter 12. Let us pray...Amen.

In Scripture, when God’s Word is spoken, one of the first reasons it is proclaimed is to lead people to repentance. Ezekiel preached repentance. Jesus preached, “**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel**”(Mark 1:15) and sent His disciples to do likewise. Paul preached repentance. They all preached repentance, and most often it was to deaf ears. How times have not changed. God’s Word is still proclaimed, and yet most people do not want to hear any of it because it goes against what they want to believe and feel. We see it in the world. We see it churches. The reason is: God’s Word is always counter-cultural. We need to turn no further than today’s reading to see how counter-cultural God’s Word is. God told Ezekiel to go and proclaim His Word to the Israelites even if they would not listen to him. Jesus was pretty much chased out of His own hometown. Jesus then sent His disciples out into the world to proclaim His Word with nothing but the shirts on their back; no food, no bag, no money, not even a change of clothes. On top of this, God’s Word tells us that suffering is good, hardships are a blessing, receiving insults, persecutions, and calamities—disasters, catastrophes, and tragedies—are grace filled, and to top it all off we should rejoice in our weakness.

Does God even know what He is asking for. God’s demands might have worked 2000 years ago with Jesus and Paul, or even 2600 years ago with Ezekiel, but they didn’t have what we have today. We have responsibilities. We have quite lots of stuff and need to pack many essentials before going anywhere. We have good health, at least most of us fortunate ones do. Suffering is never seen as a good thing. We are told to avoid doing anything or going anywhere we might be persecuted. Receiving insults is terrible and disasters, catastrophes, and tragedies are just that, tragedies which should be mourned, not rejoiced in. And weakness, weakness, is seen as almost shamefully. Many would rather die, even prematurely, to avoid showing weakness.

How we have a very serious problem with **idolatry** in our world: the idol of self. Just ask yourself: Are you more concerned with protecting earthly idols of health, wealth, and comfort, or are you are more concerned with proclaiming God’s Word? Are you more apt to trust in your own sinful self than to provide everything you need, or are you more apt to trust God at His Word that He will provide everything you need in this life? Do you fear losing the respect and/or friendship of others more than you fear God and His wrath against sin? Are you willing to sacrifice yourself, your property, your belongings, your health, and even your very life for God and His glory, or will you deny God and His Word to try and cling to your earthly treasures?

For God’s Word tells us to share His Word even when we know those hearing it are deaf to its message and will reject it outright. God still calls you and I to speak His Word. We are

also called to live lives of sacrifice, real sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel, and not lives of comfort. Being a Christian is not supposed to be easy, or comfortable, or even safe in this life. Jesus says to you, me, and all Christians, **“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, the world hates you.”** Jesus continues saying, **“If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. ... Indeed the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.”**(John 15:18-19, 20, 16:2) For if you are in Christ, as He chose you and made you His own in the waters of Baptism, the world wants you to suffer and to die: permanently. If you don’t believe me, look at what they did to Jesus. For if we truly follow Jesus, look where He ended up: to Gethsemane, Golgotha, and the grave.

Not only did the world, and even the Jews, revile and hate Jesus, or spit on Him, or curse Him, they beat him and tortured Jesus to death. The high priest in Jerusalem, Caiaphas, he hated Jesus, all He did, all He taught, and all He stood for. He hated Jesus so much that he organized a kangaroo court to force Pilate to execute Jesus in the most cruel and inhumane way the Romans had to offer: by pounding metal spikes through His wrists and feet and then watching Him slowly die on that cross. Caiaphas was willing to lie, betray, and slander Jesus to get rid of Him. If you think the world likes you any better, think again.

Yet this is nothing new. Ezekiel went and proclaimed God’s Word and was nearly executed for calling the nation to repent. Jeremiah, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Zechariah, well pretty much every Old Testament prophet was hated and threatened with death, if not executed, for sharing God’s Word and calling people to repent.

Things didn’t change for those calling people to repent in the New Testament. John the Baptist had his head physically from his shoulders for faithfully calling Herod and his wife Herodias to repent. Of the twelve disciples, including Mattias in place of Judas, and along with the apostle Paul, only John, the son of Zebedee was not executed for their proclamation of God’s Word,. And John, he was exiled for many years to the island of Patmos. All suffered. All were persecuted. All faced tremendous hardships. None collected any earthly treasure, well unless you consider physical scars from the beatings they received earthly treasures.

And all rejoiced. They boasted all the more gladly in their weaknesses. They were content with insults, hardships, and calamities. Even when the Jerusalem council arrested the twelve apostles for preaching in the temple and punished the twelve with the 39 lashes—what Jesus received right before His execution on the cross—even after that kind of beating **“they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus.”**⁴² **And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”**(Acts 5:41-42)

By earthly standards they were fools, idiots, and possibly even insane. What could they possibly believe that would lead them down such a suicidal road? Why would they give up everything and receive no earthly gain.

Well, they knew their horrible sins. They knew their socially acceptable sins were equally horrible in God's eyes. They knew they were conceived in sin, born sinful, and had condemned themselves by their own sinful actions, inactions, words, and thoughts. They knew they had nothing to offer God, not their lives, not their soul, not even their hearts, for as God's Word reveals: "**The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick;**" (Jeremiah 17:9), and, "**For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.**" (Matthew 15:19)

But they also knew their Saviour. They knew God's Word and His demands, and they repented for their sins, all of them. They made no excuses because they also knew the One who came and who saved them from their sins, who delivered them out of this world, and who gave them His eternal life through His cross, suffering, humiliation, death, and resurrection. They knew Jesus who gave them new life. In this new life they knew they were going to have to share in His suffering, persecutions, hardships, and calamities. They knew they were not going to be strong and powerful, or necessarily even have good health, but Christ would have them every step of the way. Nothing could take them from Jesus' hand, not even the hatred of this world.

We, as Christians, are also called to suffer in this life for Christ and to deny ourselves for the sake of His Gospel. Paul appealed to the Romans, as God's Word continues to appeal to all Christians. He wrote: "**I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercy of God, to present your lives as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.**" (Romans 12:1) In the Old Testament, animals were offered by putting them to death for the person or people. Yet, Christ's one sacrifice replaced the need to for such sacrifices. This way we can dedicate our entire lives to God. The terms 'worship' and 'sacrifice' are related to all of your earthly life, not simply to time spent in church.

For, even the most faithful Christians, there are unexplained problems and troubles and sufferings. As seen in the Epistle lesson, we are not alone in this. Paul talks about "**a thorn ... in the flesh, a messenger of Satan**" (2 Corinthians 12:7) sent to harass him and from becoming too elated with his position. A thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan also sounds torturous. Paul likely was suffering from a chronic painful health condition. He mentions health problems in his other letters. So Paul tells how "**Three times he pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave him.**" Of all people, one would think God would quickly relieve Paul, but God told Paul, "**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9)

Often people see their earthly troubles as a punishment for some bad thing they'd done. The reality is our earthly troubles and afflictions are not always punishments for past deeds.

Most often they are works of God intended for our benefit, that the power of God might be made more apparent in our weakness. They are opportunities to turn, or return to God and see how He continues to be the one carrying us.

All three of today’s readings point to God’s actions through His people. They point to God’s work and how God carries us while encouraging us to trust Him. In all circumstances, as God’s people we can only boast in His divine and sufficient grace. For in weakness, trials, hardships, persecutions, and calamities, we can boast of all the more gladly as the power of Christ rests upon us. For through His Son Jesus Christ, God is with you, me, and all Christians with His super-abundant and undeserved grace. We will have troubles in this world as the world attacks us as it did Jesus. But as Jesus conquered death and the grave by His death and resurrection for all, we are in Jesus by His working through Baptism, His Word, and the Lord’s Supper. Rejoice with Paul and boast in the power and salvation Christ freely offers you. Amen.

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