

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9)
July 5, 2009
2 Corinthians 12:1-10

“Are You Listening? His Grace is Enough!”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

This weekend again our country celebrates the 4th of July holiday and Independence Day. It is a time to thank God for the freedoms we have enjoyed as a country and to praise Him as well for all the blessings which are ours. Having recently returned from a trip to the East coast which included a couple of days in Philadelphia and having walked around the grounds of Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell Center, I was reminded again of the historical events leading to the founding of our country. I was also reminded in several ways during my trip about the importance of applying Scripture in its full and true meaning to our lives. So it is important that on this day we would look closely at the Scripture readings assigned for the 5th Sunday after Pentecost and apply them to our lives as citizens of this country and as Christian people who believe that the source of their life is in the living words of God. Our theme for today is this: “Are You Listening? His Grace is Enough!” May God the Holy Spirit bless our meditation on his Word this day.

I. Are You Listening?

Two of the lessons for today have what can only be described as hard words—words of law and admonition. But they are appropriate words nevertheless. In the Old Testament lesson, the prophet Ezekiel is given a command by the Lord. He says that the Spirit entered him and literally stood him up on his feet. He was given the command and sent to the people of Israel. Note though how the people of Israel are described—to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their father have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants also are impudent and stubborn.” What strange words we might say of God’s chosen people—the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God describes them as rebels, transgressors, impudent and stubborn. The lesson goes on to declare—‘I send you to them and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God.” And whether they hear or refuse to hear they will know that a prophet has been among them.’ There was a failure to hear the word of God on the part of the people of Israel. Now can we say the same of our nation today? I do not think that there is any doubt that we can. People are hearing lots of other things, but they are not listening to the Word of God. We are enamored with rock stars and celebrities. The recent death of Michael Jackson, the morbid fascination with his life and death, the idolatrous reaction to his passing and the amount of time which the media has spent on it are prime examples of where so many place their priorities. There can be so many other examples. On my trip I spent an evening and morning in Atlantic City. It was nice to walk on the Boardwalk (when it was not raining)—it was quite an education to see the thousands of people gambling away their lives. Of course the same thing happens not too far away from here at the Potawatomi casino as well. Would people even be aware if a prophet was

among them today? Or would they be too busy following all the false ideas and false gods of our time?

In the Gospel lesson for today, we see a continuation of the theme of the Old Testament lesson. But here it is Jesus himself who journeys to his hometown. It is worth noting that the Greek word used in Mark's account is "patris" which means fatherland or homeland. We could use the same word for our country as well. From the other Gospel accounts we know that Jesus went to Nazareth. He is received there with astonishment and then with doubt and hostility. "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?" They know him as the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon. They know his sisters as well. They are not impressed with Jesus. In fact many reject Him. Jesus himself says, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household." In the closing verses of the Gospel as Jesus sends his disciples out into the villages of Galilee, He tells them, "If any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave shake off the dust that is on our feet as a testimony against them."

There is the old saying that familiarity breeds contempt. That is what happened in Nazareth. Their unbelief was manifested. They could not see Jesus as He really is. But how many of our day have the same problem. Two weeks ago I attended a Sunday service at Christ Church, the Episcopal church in the old city of Philadelphia. By happenstance, another family from our church was there. They knew where I would be and their travel plans had changed slightly. We all sat together in the pew where George Washington and his wife had worshiped in that church. The church proclaims itself the church of many of the founding fathers. It was interesting being there. But it was also quite disturbing as well. The sermon was carefully written and constructed, but the name of Jesus was never mentioned once and God himself only came up five or six times. It was modern theological drivel. Two days before I was in the chapel of Princeton University and became almost ill when looking at the hymnal in the pews there and seeing how thoroughly and consistently the great hymns of the church had been neutered and sanitized to say basically nothing. You see it is not just whether the country is listening, the question is whether the church is still listening. And are you listening? Or are there too many other things getting in the way?

II. His Grace is Sufficient

If we stopped here, there would not be much hope in this message. But we cannot stop. We need to hear St. Paul in the Epistle for today. The apostle relates his glorious visit to heaven, to Paradise. He speaks as a man in Christ who is carried into the glory of the life to come. But he points out most clearly that he was not to boast in those things and so the Lord allowed him to be tested by a thorn in the flesh, as a messenger of Satan he describes it. Paul would be found best in weakness and in suffering. In the chapter before, the apostle describes many of his tribulations, the beatings, imprisonments, and persecution which came with his ministry of the Gospel. And this personal weakness as well. So he asks the Lord

three times to take it from him. But the Lord's reply is so powerful: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." The Lord's grace is all that he needs. The translation of this verse does not completely or adequately indicate what is meant by the closing words. The same Greek word that Paul uses which is translated made perfect is the word which our Lord Jesus spoke from the cross as one of his final words—"It is finished." We could truly translate this—My power is completed, finished, done in weakness." In the weakness of the cross, in the death of the Son of God, in the redemption accomplished for us there, all our strength means nothing. All our boasting is vain. Rather we must avail ourselves of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. As Paul continues in the Epistle: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

His grace is enough. "It is by grace you have been saved through faith, it is not of ourselves, it is the gift of God, so that no one can boast." It is that message that needs to be heard by all of us, in our land, in all the nations of the world. It is the message of the power of Christ who has overcome sin and death for us. We pray that that Word may be heard and that we may be listening. At the conclusion of this service we will sing a patriotic song. A few years back I was up on the top of Pikes Peak where Katherine Bates looked over the purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain and was inspired to write the words of "America the Beautiful." But how very fitting that the refrain of that song goes on again and again: "God shed his grace on Thee." Yes, indeed for his grace is enough.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.