

Sermons at Christ Church

The Joy Of The Lord Is Our Strength

Epiphany V

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I am a man of unclean lips. And I live among a people of unclean lips. Said the prophet Isaiah. Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man. Said Peter. I am the least of all the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle. Said Paul. These are three powerful statements by three people about the often sad perception of ourselves as being unworthy, sinful or inadequate. We have a good sense of what is deemed holy, divine and utterly godly. And as far as possible, we think we know who we are and so our desire has always been to gravitate towards limiting any potential interaction with that which is holy, divine and utterly godly. We are very much aware that that which is holy brings out the best in us. That which is holy opens our eyes to behold the person we can be. Epiphany is a season that reveals to us not our sense of unworthiness but the reality that God desires to work on us and with us just the way we are. In fact, this revelation helps us to understand that God isn't as much concerned with our unworthiness or inadequacies, rather, God is concerned with our willingness-the willingness to work as hard as Paul. And so like the prophet Isaiah, are you willing to respond, here I am, send me? Send me, not to where I want to go but where you desire for me to go. Send me, not to say what I want to say but what you want me to say. Send me, not to do what I want to do but what you desire for me to do.

In the gospel story, Jesus meets these fisher folks at the shore and invites them to put out into the deep water, and let down your nets for a catch. Yes, it has been a long night for Peter and his friends. They worked hard but caught nothing. They pull their boat to the shore and here comes Jesus with a request. Peter simply responds, we have worked all night. We caught nothing. I can feel the exasperation in Peter's voice-why is he asking us to let down our nets for a catch? As many of you know, I grew up right by the Atlantic Ocean and majority of the people in my neighborhood were fishermen. I have met many a fisherman who ventured at night into the open seas, risked their lives, worked hard but caught nothing. I always wondered, how come there's so much fish in the sea but they caught nothing. What I admired about those fishermen was, the fact that they caught nothing, doesn't dampen their hopes, they were always willing to go back out to the open seas the next day to let down their nets for a catch.

Peter and his friends were tired, but listen to Peter, because of your word, I will let down the net. Jesus' command to Peter was in direct contradiction to his experience as a professional fisherman, yet he placed his trust in the word of the Lord. Because of your word, I will put my interest aside and do what you have

asked me to do. And when they let down the net, and saw the unbelievable catch, all Peter could do in response was to fall on his knees and proclaim nothing save his sinfulness. Yes, even he, as sinful as he may have been, he experienced the holy, the divine and the utterly godly. How was he to interpret this holy moment than to proclaim his unworthiness? The real issue here isn't so much as his unworthiness but that even in that state, he touched that which is holy, divine and utterly godly. The question then is, why do you beat yourself up for not being worthy? Why do you think you are inadequate? What Peter demonstrates for us over and over again is that it is the flawed individuals, people like you and me that God depends on to do God's work. And so the real issue isn't about worthiness or adequacy, it is about willingness. Epiphany, the season where we encounter the holy who affirms not our unworthiness but our willingness to respond to his call.

In a few moments, we will respond to the opening dialogue of the Eucharistic prayer with the Sanctus "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of host. Heaven and earth are full of your glory." These are the exact words spoken by the prophet Isaiah in his vision of the glory of God which filled the temple. In the presence of that which is holy, sacred and utterly godly, the prophet proclaims himself a sinner, and that such a vision of the holy should in fact destroy him. I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. He said. I am not worthy to behold this holy moment. Indeed when we chant the Sanctus, we do not do so on the premise of being worthy to partake in the service of praise and thanksgiving, we do so in spite of who we are. We believe that God does not count on our worthiness or lack thereof, but on our willingness to offer a kind of praise which is rooted and also finds its meaning in our redemption.

Paul's big deal was his redemption. For him, the only good news was God raised Jesus from the dead. Yes, I did not know Jesus myself. I wasn't part of the group that Jesus met at the shore and then invited them to be fishers of people. Yes, upon his resurrection, he revealed himself to so many different people some of whom are alive, and I am the last person to whom he revealed himself. In fact, I am not only the least of the apostles but I am not fit to be called an apostle. I am unworthy to be called an apostle. I am not worthy of the spot that I now occupy because I persecuted the church. But I am what I am, not because of my past persecution of the church, or anything that I have done or undone. I am what I am, not because of my unworthiness or my inadequacies.

I am what I am because the grace of God found me. And when God's grace found me, like the prophet Isaiah, He lighted my mouth with a burning charcoal, cleansed me and gave me the ability to speak His word, to share His story of human redemption, to tell the incredible story of a crucified and resurrected Christ.

God lifts us up from the abyss of depression, self-pity and self-rejection. And in the midst of our adulation, we hear the voice of the One who cleansed and lifted us asking, who shall I send? Who would go for me? Our task is to raise our hands and respond, here I am, melt me, mold me, fill me and use me. Here

I am, send me. Send me, not because I am worthy but because I have come to know myself as one who is more than willing to faithfully answer God's call to serve.

I want to conclude with a prayer by St. Augustine. The prayer is, Lord Jesus-Let Me Know Myself. He writes:

Lord Jesus, let me know myself and know You,
And desire nothing save only You.
Let me hate myself and love You.
Let me do everything for the sake of You.
Let me humble myself and exalt You.
Let me think of nothing except You.
Let me die to myself and live in You.
Let me accept whatever happens as from You.
Let me banish self and follow You,
And ever desire to follow You.
Let me fly from myself and take refuge in You,
That I may deserve to be defended by You.
Let me fear for myself, let me fear You,
And let me be among those who are chosen by You.
Let me distrust myself and put my trust in You.
Let me be willing to obey for the sake of You.
Let me cling to nothing save only to You,
And let me be poor because of You.
Look upon me, that I may love You.
Call me that I may see You,
And for ever enjoy You.

Epiphany, the season when we encounter the divine, the holy and the utterly godly. Not because we are worthy, but because his grace found us. And by that encounter, we have come to know ourselves as ever willing to respond to God's call to fish for people. Amen.