

Weekly Reading – Monday, June 29, 2009

We turn now to the lessons for Sunday, July 5, 2009, which is the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 9. It's also the July 4th weekend. Preachers who want to do something patriotic or on church and state might be able to find a little help in the Old Testament lesson, but other than that these texts don't particularly lend themselves to Independence Day. That's okay. It's not the job of the church to keep national holidays. Canadians, where I was last year, see how Americans wrap Christianity and flag together are put off by it, as they should be.

II Samuel 5: 1 - 5, 9 - 10

This continues the series of readings from the narratives of David's rise to power. This is crucial one, as the various tribes of Israel now unite behind David and he moves to establish Jerusalem as the center of his monarchy. Preachers might reflect on a couple themes here: David is described as "shepherd over the people of Israel." Of course, this shepherd image becomes one of the ways of understanding Christ's ministry. Second, the united nation is established by covenant with David and among the tribes. As I prepare for our son's upcoming wedding, I've been thinking again about the difference between relationships governed by contract and those shaped by covenant. Covenants require trust and maturity. Third, the text concludes with a familiar refrain, "David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him." The king remains a servant, a servant of God.

II Corinthians 12: 2 - 10

I am not sure why verse one is omitted as it helps to establish the context, which is really crucial to understanding a text as paradoxical as this one is. The background issue is Paul's authority and the unfavorable comparison that the Corinthians are making between Paul and those he terms "super apostles" (11:5). These other teacher/ preachers and the Corinthians find Paul's resume a little thin in terms of mighty deeds, miracles, healings, and great acts of power. Paul has a theological reason for not wanting to get caught in this argument. He fears that pointing to how impressive or hot a particular teacher/ preacher is removes the focus from Christ and the cross and places it on the particular super-apostle. Moreover, it conditions us to the idea that faith is a ticket to us getting something we want. So Paul boasts, but ironically. He boasts of his limitations, failures, troubles and of a thorn in the flesh. The word he receives from the Lord is, "My power is made perfect in weakness." These issues are still very much with us today as people adhere to someone who promises results, success, or power. This turns faith into a way of getting what we want rather than a way of becoming what God wants.

Mark 6: 1 - 13

Though last week's text, Mark 5: 21 - 43, was last week, interpreters should not fail to notice Mark's juxtaposition of two stories of immense faith (the woman with the bleeding condition and Jairus, the synagogue ruler) with the little faith of the people of Jesus' hometown. "And he could do no deed of power there . . ." What an interesting juxtaposition! Does our faith,

then, control God? Are we in charge? No, it's never that simple. There's a kind of interaction between our deep, wild and risk-filled trust or faith and the power of God. But the point would seem to be that God's power really is limited when we are neither open nor expectant (see the two figures in 5: 21 - 43 for "open" and "expectant.") Moreover, finding little faith in his hometown again scores the danger of being insiders. So often in the Bible the insiders miss what's going on. Their sense of entitlement and complacency is blinding, and just the opposite of the naked, desperate faith of the two figures in the previous text. Then there is another interesting juxtaposition as we move from the first part of this lesson to the second, the sending of the twelve. Jesus can't do much in Nazareth. Does he retreat, withdraw, give up? No, he sends the twelve out to proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom of God and invite repentance. My translation of "Proclaiming the Kingdom and inviting repentance" is "There is a new possibility, turn and receive it." Note that just as Jesus experienced rejection at Nazareth, so he prepares his disciples for that possibility. "If any place will not welcome you, as you leave shake the dust off your feet." Too many sermons do not give a message clear enough and bold enough that people might actually reject it. More preachers need to take the risk of rejection.