

## “My Grace is Sufficient for You”

- *14<sup>th</sup> Sunday*
- *July 8, 2012*
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When I read and pray the scriptural readings of this Sunday, I keep coming back to the words of Jesus to St. Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you.” It is probably because I need to hear these words. I am thinking that you do too, Jesus saying to us, “My grace is sufficient for you.”

After enumerating all the revelations, accomplishments, sacrifices, and sufferings he has had and making light of them, St. Paul tells of what he calls a “thorn in the flesh”, “an angel of Satan to beat me”, in order to keep him from being too elated. He says he begged Christ repeatedly that it might leave him, only to hear Christ say, “My grace is sufficient for you.” This thorn in the flesh almost certainly had nothing to do with sex—that’s the obsession of us and perhaps of our church in this day, but not Paul’s. Much more likely it was something like epilepsy, which for a bold preacher was publicly shaming, humiliating, abasing. No matter how much he begs, Christ says in his shame, humiliation, abasement “My grace is sufficient for you”; “My power is made evident in this weakness, this shame”.

What “my grace is sufficient for you” means is Christ saying to Paul and us, “No matter what, and especially because of accepting whatever most shames you, I am with you; I am there; I come close; I accompany you; you are not alone. I am at hand and supporting you in your weakness; your acceptance of your shame, your fear; your suffering. Your weakness opens a place for me to be with you; and that is sufficient, that’s enough. That’s all you need. I am all you need.”

This is something like what Ezekiel the prophet in the first reading is also told. He is afraid to be a prophet, to stand up and speak, to a rebellious, stiff-necked people. He wavers. God speaks to him, gives him his spirit, sets the prophet on his feet, and sends him forth to stand up, because God will be with him, and in spite of his fears God will not leave him crushed before the “hard faced, obstinate of heart, rebellious people.” They shall know there is a prophet because God will be with Ezekiel in his fear and will not let him down. That’s Ezekiel’s version of hearing, “My grace is sufficient for you.”

Look at Jesus in the gospel. He comes back to the village and the people where he has lived for thirty years and comes into the simple synagogue where he has heard the scriptures, prayed, and worshipped. He teaches, but now stands before them as a prophet. They resent him, they reject him, they slur his prophetic boldness by casting aspersions on him and his relatives, they do not listen to him or put faith in him. Imagine that rejection by his own and, as the reading says, his amazement at their lack of faith. But he is living by his father saying, “I am with you”; “My presence with you is enough for you.” Jesus turns from his own to seek out and teach disciples—us—who, he hopes, will not turn away.

What is the experience, the rejection, the situation, the suffering, the feared threat, the public humiliation in which you hear “My grace is sufficient for you”? Where and how do you learn and do you trust that Christ stands by you and is drawn close by whatever is the thorn in your human experience? No matter, one is always there. Is that sufficient, is that enough for you? Yes and no.

I believe that every person deserves and needs someone to stand by them no matter who they are or what they have done. It is often the mother or family of a criminal. Everyone deserves someone. See Jerry Sandusky led out in handcuffs by police after being found guilty of 45 counts of sexual abuse and the crowd cheering his conviction and mocking him and calling him “a monster”? But there see a wife walking behind him. Everyone deserves someone to stand by them. Or see the person to be executed on a stage exposed to the public, a dead man walking, and see a Sister Helen Prejean who is Christ to him by standing by him as far as a cruel state will allow her to do so. Or think of any dying person, any homeless person, any exiled person: each deserves someone to stand by them.

Jesus himself needed, deserved this. Yes, in the garden he accepted to drink the bitter cup, accepted to follow his father’s will, depended on the sufficiency of God’s presence, but still he begged, “Stay and watch with me.” And when utterly alone on the cross still trusting, he deserved and needed and looked with love on the very, very few who were able to stand by him. Everyone deserves someone to stand by them: every student, every poor person, every unemployed person, every religious sister, every bishop, every homeless person, every ill or dying individual, every public person, every enemy, every frightened child or adult. Everyone deserves someone to stand by them to be with them.

“My grace is sufficient for you” means that no matter what Christ will stand by us and be with us in whatever our weakness is, and this is enough. All we need is the faith to accept this. And we are called to stand by and be with whoever needs us or deserves someone to stand by them, regardless of who they are and how helpless we may feel. In doing this we are the ministers and the gospel witnesses of the gracious presence of Christ, working through our insufficiency, to be sufficient for the one he loves.

Perhaps there are two simple questions to pray over:

- How do we need Christ?
- Who needs us?