

## Only a Carpenter

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2 Samuel 5:1,9-10; 2 Corinthians 12:6-9; Mark 6:1-13

Today's selected readings are from the *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*:

Three key verses from 2 Samuel, Chapter 5:

Verse 1: All the tribes of Israel approached David in Hebron and said, "In time past when Saul was our king, YOU were the one who really ran the country.

Verse 9: David made the fortress city Zion that he conquered his own home, and named it 'City of David.'

Verse 10: **David proceeded with a stronger stride, and a larger embrace** since the God-of-the-Angel-Armies was with him.

A reading from Mark 6, verses 1-13:

Jesus returned to his hometown. On the Sabbath, he gave a lecture in the meeting place. He made a real hit, impressing everyone. "We had no idea he was this good!" they said. "How did he get so wise all of a sudden, get such ability?"

But in the next breath, they were cutting him down. "He's JUST A CARPENTER – Mary's boy. We've known him since he was a kid. We know his brothers James, Justus, Jude, and Simon, and his sisters too. Who does he think he is?" **They tripped over what little they knew of him, and fell, sprawling. They never got any further.**

Jesus told his disciples, "A prophet has little honor in his hometown, among his relatives, on the streets he played in as a child." Jesus wasn't able to do much of anything there – he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them, that's all.

Later, Jesus called the Twelve to him, and sent them off in pairs. **He gave them authority and power to deal with the opposition.** He sent them off with these instructions: **"Don't think you need a lot of extra equipment. YOU are the equipment. Keep it simple.** And...no luxury inns. Get a modest place and be content there until you leave. **If you're not welcomed, not listened to, withdraw. Don't make a scene.** Shrug your shoulders and be on your way."

When they went out on the road, **they preached with joyful urgency that life can be radically different.** Right and left, they sent demons packing. They brought wellness to the sick, anointing their bodies and healing their spirits."

2 Corinthians 12:6-9 (words attributed to the Apostle Paul):

If I had a mind to brag a little, I could probably do it without looking ridiculous. But I'll spare you. I don't want anyone imagining me as anything other than the fool you'd encounter if you saw me on the street or heard me talk. But because of the extravagance of the revelations that have come to me, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given **the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations.** Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! **At first, I didn't think of it as a gift,** and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then God

told me, “My grace is enough, it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.” Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. ***I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift.*** It was a case of Christ’s strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer....

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Do any of you have one of those old UCC bumper stickers that says, “To be IS to do?” Supposedly a quote from Socrates, it sums up the early spirit of our denomination rather well. We are a people who mean to walk our talk. The things we do with our lives are a huge part of who we are. “To be is to do”. Then too, there’s the opposite phrase attributed to the French philosopher, Sartre, “The do is to be.” We are human beings, not mere human doings. To do is to BE. And let’s not forget that most meaningful phrase attributed to Frank Sinatra either: “Doo-be-doo-be-doo-be-doo be doo.”

Actually, what I want to DO now is to briefly examine all three of today’s recommended lectionary readings because together, they provide some good sound advice as to how to BE strong, and how to DO well in life.

The Old and New Testament stories for today certainly offer distinctively contrasting images of purposeful work and of what we need in life to do well and to be strong.

The story of David being crowned King in 2 Samuel 5 is at one end of the contrasting spectrum. David had started out as the perfect storybook mentor for the young, weak, and small. Now he is smart and strong, powerful and popular, and, in spite of many and rather serious actual faults, he can almost do no wrong in the eyes of the people! He happens to be the kinda guy who has inbred movie-star quality charisma. His humble shepherding background provides the perfect Horacio Algiers working class image of a king who supposedly understands the needs of ordinary people...plus NOW he’s a big time war hero, and an astute politician of proven renown: through his victories against Saul’s Southern Kingdom in particular, he’s been consolidating the scattered parts of the kingdom; he’s strengthened temporary strategic alliances with neighboring Philistines; AND he has taken control of the Canaanites’ last stronghold, the destined-for-greatness backwater hill town of Jerusalem, calling it for the first time by its rather self aggrandizing name, the City of David. Without a doubt, David was a can-do king. Israel had long wanted to have just such a strong executive; they wanted to be more like other stronger nations. Though Old Testament prophets had warned them against becoming too much like other nations, with their top-down hierarchies and kings, many Israelites were getting tired of scattered, disorganized tribes, intertribal strife, and local leader-judges on the losing side of too many battles. The start of David’s reign was, by contract, a *very* heady time. We can respect many of the things King David accomplished, and learn from him. But part of what we need to learn is that while everyone was still looking to the big hero in Jerusalem to make things secure and right, all-too-quickly what resulted was an era with too few “checks and balances” attached to unbridled executive power (not that different from our own nation’s today). Or to make another rough historical comparison, David’s kind of strength as a leader may have been more like that of Napoleon than like that of Jesus.

In Mark 6, we have a very different kind of story. Here Jesus’ giftedness, strengths, and vocational greatness are not being appreciated much at all – at least not in his own home town.

The Israelites gladly allowed David to name the recently-conquered Philistine hill town, The City of David, but no one would have thought during Jesus' lifetime to have named Nazareth "the city of Jesus". Just the opposite: when Jesus got back to his home town, people's amazement at his wisdom quickly degenerated into suspicious mistrust: "How did he get so wise all of a sudden? After all, he's JUST another ordinary Nazarene CARPENTER! My late friend Grant Verbeck was a small town carpenter by trade, a man of few words, but I consider him to have been one of the wisest people I have ever known. He not only had good carpentry skills. He was well-read, and had immense innate wisdom about life and faith and nonviolence. Many who met him never knew about those things though, because the ONLY became acquainted with the hardworking, man-of-few-words carpenter. The Mark 6 text says that the people of Nazareth "tripped over what *little* they knew about *Jesus*, and fell, sprawling. They never got any further." That's also what happens to a lot of people who leave the church in their adolescence and never come back. They "trip over what little they know about Jesus and they church...and never get any further" either. The little church I served for 12 years in Chicago was called Nazareth United Church of Christ. The scripture I loved to quote the most there was the one that asks that question: "CAN anything good come out of Nazareth?" Naturally I hoped the members of Nazareth Church would answer in the affirmative. But that's not how the people of Nazareth in Jesus' day were answering that question. They doubted anything good could come out of their own little town. Nazareth's collectively low sense of self-esteem caused them to distrust the greatness of one of their own. So they said of Jesus, "He's just a carpenter." And our town is just little old Nazareth. "How can anything truly good come out of this place?" That may be our tendency too: to not adequately trust our own God-given ability to spread good news, to have an impact, both with our own personal lives, and with our church community. We may say, "How can anything good, how can anything big, ever get accomplished here, by little old me and by a few others at best?" And even if your sense of confidence and self-esteem is quite good, maybe especially when it is quite good, others may think even less of you for it, like they did of Jesus: "Who does he think he is?" Who do those Broadview Church folks think THEY are, being confident about their purpose and calling in life? How dare they? Don't they know they are nobodies? The town fathers of Nazareth not only didn't give Jesus much credit, they took offense. Familiarity had already so bred contempt, that Jesus could barely do anything worthwhile there at all. We too probably have to face the fact that we have neighbors who want to have little or nothing to do with us, who consider us to be, perhaps because we are members of a church of any kind, people to be disliked, opposed, or dismissed. At times we may have to just accept the fact that they think that way of us, and respectfully move on.

We don't need the support and backing of everyone though. A core community of folks willing and eager to work together, to be salt and light and leaven may be all it takes. But without the support of at least a few, even Jesus is powerless to accomplish many great things. We can't do much alone. We need to work as a team, to share leadership, and to back each other up, because not everyone we might hope to reach with good news will be willing and ready to accept it.

Now – notice the way Jesus' SHARES leadership. He knows how to delegate; he calls out the gifted potential in others. Sending the disciples out two by two, "He gave *them* authority and power to deal with the opposition". Unlike King David, Napoleon or most sitting presidents, Jesus seemed to have no need to hold onto the reigns of power. Sometimes the hardest thing of all may be to allow someone else to take *their* turn. Other people make mistakes. They may not

DO things as well as we want. And yet the purposeful work of Jesus IS to empower and to strengthen others, and that *only* happens with a certain degree of trial and error. The text doesn't say the disciples always won people over. It's clear they did not. And yet they "preached with joyful urgency that life can be radically different". They **maintained that sense of joyful urgency, that hope that life could be much better for all**, and that was enough.

Jesus also instructs the disciples to not get too comfortable. I like our translation that quotes Jesus as saying: "Don't think you need a lot of extra equipment. YOU are the equipment." You and I don't need a lot of extra stuff either. WE are what's important, not what we take with us when we die. **Keep it simple**. And...WHEN we're not welcomed, not listened to, **we don't have to get in a big fight**. If the opposition gets fierce, we don't have to make a big scene. **We can simply move on to the next place, and the next one after that, until we find a place we can do some good**. (Comment about - Brethren slogan: journey simply, peacefully, together.)

In our third and last text from 2 Corinthians, the gifted doer and leader of the day, The Apostle Paul, ruminates about his own personal HANDICAP or "thorn in the flesh." No one alive today has any sure knowledge as to what this build-in humility-making infirmity actually was for Paul. Was it a physical ailment like diabetes or arthritis? Was it a spiritual or emotional impairment, such as an unusual tendency toward despondency? Was it something that merely distinguished him from the majority, and happened to provide others an excuse to be biased against him, like having a menial kind of job or being gay or left-handed? Or maybe Paul had some kind of mental illness; maybe he was manic-depressive. A lot of what Paul says sounds pretty manic to me! Then next thing you know, he seems to be agonizingly self-critical and down on himself. Like so many people with bipolar tendencies, Paul is absolutely brilliant – a wise, world-transforming doer and leader if there ever was one.

But the nature of the specific handicap isn't the point. The point is, we ALL have handicaps, that's just the way things are. And often God works through human weaknesses even more than through human strengths. We are created with diverse built-in limitations to our giftedness as capable leaders, built-in humility-making brokenness, built-in checks and balances on human hubris. Many of these limitations are gifts in disguise. Paul uses his own example to show that God does not magically remove everything we perceive to be self-limiting. In fact, "the very things that (we perceive to be) stumbling blocks" become "the most powerful ways for us to apprehend the grace of God." That's been my own experience with regard to my sexual orientation. I'm more conscious of the needs of certain hurting and marginalized persons than I would be otherwise. Our thorns in flesh HELP rather than hinder our life's work. I'm a better pastor for mine. Even though our wounds in some ways limit us, they also enhance our ability to heal and to care. We can't and aren't supposed to rid ourselves of all our handicaps. Everyone who has a mole on their forehead doesn't have to get plastic surgery to remove it, everyone who is heavy doesn't have to go on a crash diet, everyone who is gay isn't supposed to try to be straight. We'd be all the poorer if we could and did these things because the grace of God comes THROUGH human distinctiveness, not in spite of it.

Lastly, we are reminded that things are not always as they seem. A simple shepherd may be the very one God can transform into a mighty king; someone with a mental illness may yet initiate a whole new world religion and transform whole civilizations; a peasant who cannot even find

respect in his own village may become the one through whom heaven and earth meet. ONLY a carpenter? Hardly! The eyes of faith have to look deeper than that - even all the way to the very center of the heart of God, where there's a place and a purpose envisioned for all of us.

In summary, let us do what Jesus called his first disciples to do: to preach with joyful urgency that life CAN be radically different. Let's keep things simple as we do that, knowing we don't need a lot of extra equipment, that we ourselves ARE the equipment. And utilizing the buddy system, let us go as a team, relying both on one another and on God, who has already provided us with all the basics we'll need. Let's be confident about having been given sufficient power and stamina to deal with the opposition we will encounter, and that just because some won't welcome us, we don't have to get into a lot of big fights. And let us recognize that the very things that seem to handicap us the most are God's good gifts in disguise, gifts which humble us even as they urge us on in the distinctive ways in which we each can be strong.

May we know it to be so, Amen.