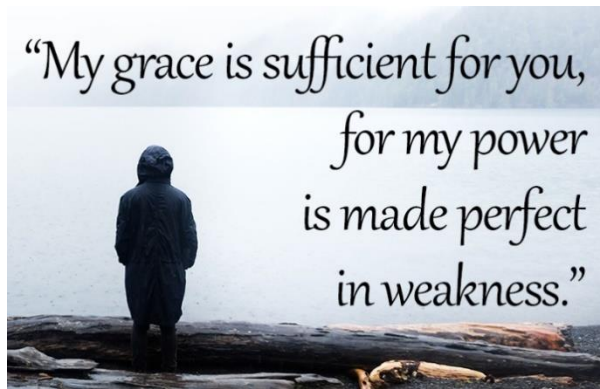


## Homily – July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2024 – 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time



If you were to wake me up at 3 o'clock in the morning by shining a flashlight in my eyes and asking me to name the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, I would probably only come up with one—courage (sometimes called fortitude). It's the only

gift I've ever wanted, but it seems to be the one that has eluded me the most.

I think of courage when I think of the three Scripture readings that we just heard proclaimed. To speak a prophetic word, to speak a word of truth to someone isn't easy. People aren't always ready, willing, or in a space to hear the truth that comes from our mouths, even though it is the truth, and even though the truth will set them free. Looking at it from the other side is important, too. To hear a prophetic word, to hear a truth, directed at us can also be equally uncomfortable. It's a wake up call we usually don't like to hear, and besides that, it's humbling. Both speaking and listening to a prophetic word takes courage.

The prophet Ezekiel, as a 25-year-old, was sent into exile with his fellow Jews to Babylon. Five years into captivity, God called him to speak to the *children of Israel*. Ezekiel's first task as a prophet was to tell his own people in captivity that the reason they were in this mess was because they brought it on to themselves by continually rebelling against God. We are our worst enemy, every one of us here.

Self-inflicted problems are the worst to overcome. Many people with addictions or who are in prison have told me, “I am my own worst enemy.”

God warned Ezekiel, ahead of time, that his own people, his Jewish people, are a stubborn, rebellious people who may hear you or refuse to hear you. But one way or another, they will know ***there has been a Prophet among them***. God then promised to give Ezekiel one thing that he could count on, and that one thing was God’s very own word. One day Ezekiel had a vision, a calling you might say, where God gave Ezekiel a scroll and insisted Ezekiel eat it (like eating a fortune cookie and the message inside, all in one go!). The scroll contained God’s word. God’s word was to enter into Ezekiel and become part of him, so that when he spoke, he would be speaking God’s word and not his own. If they rejected Ezekiel, they would be rejecting God.

Similarly, Jesus knew that his message would be rejected by the majority. He also was not naïve to the fact that his disciples would face the same rejection. He says as much at the end of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are you when people put you down, dismiss you, or damage your reputation with lies on account of me. When that happens, and it will, rejoice and be glad for all of heaven will be applauding. My prophets have always gotten into this kind of trouble” (Mt. 5:11-12).

When Jesus returns to his hometown to teach in the local synagogue, he was initially hailed as one who was filled with wisdom. But quickly the crowd turns on him. The accusation, ***“Is not this the carpenter?”*** was meant to be derogatory. How dare a carpenter, and a son of a carpenter—to make it worse-- presume to

be a teacher of wisdom! “Is not this the carpenter, *the son of Mary...*” In the Middle East, in the culture Jesus grew up in, a son was always identified by his father. You were always “Simon, son of Jonah,” or “James and John, sons of Zebedee.” To be identified as “son of Mary” was to cast doubt about Jesus’ father. It was equivalent to saying, “We don’t know who your father is, and you probably don’t either. You’re the son of Mary, so how dare you think you have something important to say to us.” In Luke’s gospel it’s even worse; they try to kill Jesus.

In the honor system in the Middle East the son is expected to take up his father’s occupation or profession. To assume you could do better than your father was seen as arrogance. Honor requires that a person remain in their inherited status. So, get in the box, Jesus, the box we’ve decided you should be in and stay there.

What prevents us from listening to prophets who continue to speak in our time and place? Maybe the clue comes at the end of this gospel passage where it says, “**Jesus could do no deed of power there,**” and it continues, “**Jesus was amazed at their unbelief.**” It’s a little bit puzzling to me. I always thought that Jesus’ divine power was more than sufficient to overcome the lack of faith that he encountered in them and in us. Just two weeks ago we had Jesus sleeping in the boat when a storm came up. His disciples are terrified and want him to do something. Jesus calms the storm and then asks, “What’s the matter with you all? Don’t you have any faith?” (Mk. 4:41). In that case, Jesus was still able to answer their prayers, still able to rebuke the storm, even though his disciples lacked sufficient faith. In other words, their lack of faith didn’t put a crimp in Jesus’ style. Their lack of faith wasn’t a sufficient obstacle to his power to save them. So, why does a lack of faith

seem to hold Jesus up from deeds of power in Nazareth when a lack of faith didn't hold Jesus up from calming the storm?

Perhaps Jesus couldn't perform miracles in his hometown not because the peoples' faith in him was insufficient. Maybe it was because their faith in themselves was too great. They believed they were in control. Like I said, we are our own worst enemy. The people of Nazareth thought they knew who Jesus was, after all he grew up in their midst. They falsely believed that their world view was in some way more accurate than Jesus' world view.

You and I aren't like those people of Nazareth at all, are we? We think to ourselves, "Hey, I've got faith. I believe. I come to Mass every weekend, and even sometimes during the week." If we were honest, many of us would have to admit, we really only want God on our terms. We want God to be God but not if it means having to give up one bit of control we enjoy right now.

Paul had to learn to relinquish control. He said, "I prayed to you, Lord, three times that you take this thorn out of my flesh." We never find out what Paul is referring to when he talks about this thorn. Is it a sinful tendency that he is struggling with? Is it a handicap he was born with that he wishes was no longer there? Is it a negative attitude he has toward others? Or is the thorn people who oppose him or who are hostile toward him? We don't know, so we are meant to insert our own thorn into the story.

In a moment of sheer enlightenment Paul realizes that the thorn, the very thing he wanted God to rid him of, is absolutely necessary to keep him humble. So, God didn't take away the thorn but said, "***My grace is sufficient for you.***" In other words, "I'm not taking anything away from you; instead, I'm giving you something—my grace." Paul was invited, through God's grace, to see that the very thing that caused him pain, was the same thing that brought him closer to God. It was as if God was saying, "Paul, I'm so glad you are no longer in control. Finally, I can work in you. I had to make you weak, so that you could rely only on my strength."

Every one of us here will have our "game" fall apart. We will be up against circumstances in life that we can't control, can't fix, can't undo, can't redo, and can't even understand why they ever happened in the first place. In desperation, we'll finally learn what it means to call on God. In frustration, we'll wonder why we didn't call on God's strength much earlier. That will be a moment of grace. In that moment the miracles Jesus couldn't do in Nazareth will begin to flow in us, and we will join Paul in saying, "the weaker I get, the stronger I become in Christ."

Have courage; God's grace is working in you.

*~Fr. Phil*