

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 4, 2021

EZEKIEL 2:1-5 | PSALM 123 | 2 CORINTHIANS 12:2-10 | MARK 6:1-13

A couple of years ago, I was visiting someone from church at a big hospital complex. Instead of having designated clergy parking spots in the lot, this place just had you park in the garage and validated your parking on the way out. Easy enough.

On my way out of the hospital, I asked the receptionist to validate my parking since I was clergy, and I was here for work. And they replied, “Do you have documentation?” And the short answer was no. I had the shirt. That’s usually good enough. That wasn’t good enough. I had business cards. That wasn’t good enough. I tried the thing where you search your pockets and say, “Ummmm,” until they say, “Oh, it’s fine.” They never said it was fine. I had the bishop’s cell phone number. That seemed like a bad idea. Eventually I just gave up and gave them the eight dollars.

About a month later, I got an envelope in the mail with a little card signed by the bishop and a note explaining that you could use this to prove that you’re clergy. In case you ever, I don’t know, need to get your parking validated.

All of the readings we heard today are, in some way, about credentials and authority. They’re about getting people to take you seriously, what to do to earn people’s trust, and what to do when they don’t.

A good starting point is the story of Jesus going home to Nazareth. He teaches in the synagogue and people are astounded by his teaching. But what happens? He’s rejected. The problem isn’t what Jesus says so much as who it is who’s saying it. He’s too close to the people there. You notice they don’t reject the teaching, just the one giving it. *The carpenter? The son of Mary? And all his brothers and sisters are around? No. Come on.* The Greek here is literally that the assembly “stumbled over him.” They just couldn’t get past who was talking. The problem for Jesus is that he’s not credible in Nazareth. He didn’t have any authority there.

And so instead of getting mad or resentful or lashing out, Jesus turns to the disciples and says, “That’s okay. If some people don’t listen to me, if they think I’m not credible, if they think I don’t have authority, then I’m going to send you.”

This is admirable of Jesus, always taking the high road, but it’s probably less reassuring to the disciples. If Jesus wasn’t seen as credible, if people didn’t take him seriously, then how is anyone going to take me seriously?

I think we know something of that anxiety. When people ask why we should be worthy of their trust or attention, we often find ourselves searching our pockets for a piece of paper that doesn’t exist. Where does our authority and credibility come from?

There’s a temptation to come up with our own justifications. You should take us seriously because we say you should. You should take us seriously because that’s what good people do. You should take us seriously because we are super friendly. But none of those answers ever hold up. And, even worse, they end up creating even more skepticism.

There’s a glimpse of a better answer in today’s reading from 2 Corinthians. St. Paul is writing to this church in Corinth about this group of people who have been coming around the church. And this group of people have been trying to sell the Corinthians on some spiritual program. And they always introduce themselves by talking about some unimaginably profound spiritual experience they had. This thing happened to me. God said this to me. An angel told me this. Essentially, you should listen to me because I had this mystical experience. They are trying to build up their authority. To make themselves seem impressive and worthy of people’s attention.

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And Paul has this response which seems boring at first but is actually really funny. He says, *I heard about these people coming in and talking about how you should listen to them they had these out-of-body spiritual experiences. And that's super interesting because I know this person who was caught up into the third heaven and told a bunch of secrets that they can't repeat to anyone, and maybe it was an out-of-body experience, but I really don't know because only God knows. And I suppose I bolster my credibility by telling you about that person's experience, but I'm not going to. Because it doesn't really matter. I'm going to tell you about how the power of Christ is made known in my weakness.*

There's no bait and switch. No self-promotion. No other shoe to drop. No *Now that I have your attention*. No, Paul says that my credibility is the fact that I'm being honest with you. My authority comes from the fact that I have nothing to gain from this encounter and relationship other than your flourishing. I'm not selling you myself. I'm not advertising my experience. I'm offering you the power of God made known in our confused and muddled lives.

That's basically what Jesus says when he sends the disciples out in mission. He doesn't send them out with anything other than themselves. They need to travel light. Literally. No bread. No bag. No money. Just one tunic. A pair of sandals. But the need to travel light is more metaphorical, too. Because the thing that's going to weigh them down, the thing that's going to hamper their mission, isn't a second tunic. It's going to be their self-made credentials. Their attempts to justify their mission and authority based on their own talents and skills and abilities. Their anxiety about being impressive or attractive or filled with enough gravitas to impress people.

No, Jesus says. I am giving you the authority. So you can leave the pretense and ego-boosting and resume padding behind. Like St. Paul, all you need is a body, a life, and the power of God revealed in weakness. That's enough. You can leave the rest on the side of the road.

Jesus says the same thing to us. That we have authority. Not the authority to coerce others. Not the authority to take power over others. Not the authority to be free of accountability. But the power to continue the mission of God in new, creative, and faithful ways in our own community. That we have the power to root out evil from our world, our communities, and our hearts. And we have the power to heal the bodies in our world that have been cast aside. When we engage in our mission as a congregation and as individuals, we are engaged in that same mission.

And more than that, that authority is given to us by virtue of our baptisms. When you trust in the promises of your baptism, you have everything you need to be grafted into God's redeeming and reconciling work. You don't need one bag. You don't need two tunics. You don't need to get taken up into the third heaven. All you need is the power of God made known in weakness. And Jesus promises us that we already have that.

Does that mean that our common mission is easy? Nope. It can be really hard. Does that mean we'll never fail? Nope. We fail all the time. It happens. Does that mean it will make everyone happy? Not a chance. Sometimes the good news makes people upset.

But it means that we can live and serve free from the anxiety of having to prove our own authority and the worthiness of our calling. And we can use our hands to further God's mission instead of searching our pockets for a piece of paper that doesn't exist.

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