

Bishop Peggy Johnson Service of Ordination Sermon Notes, May 17, 2013

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I Samuel 30:1-6

Mark 6: 30-32

Revelation 2: 1-7

Strengthened in the Lord

I. Introduction

- A. (Video clip of people “stuck” on an escalator)**
- B. Didn’t you want to shout at these people, just walk up the escalator???** You have the power all along to be free but you are in needless bondage.
- C. This is a parable of course...a parable about life and facing trials and how we react to it.**
- D. It is a parable of the church because we often act like this couple on the escalator...we have the power of the Holy Spirit to be free...to overcome...to have the victory but somehow we are so quick to forget this and to be stuck...stuck in despair and powerlessness....and can I say it? A good bit of complaining.**
- E. Tonight we ordain and commission souls for ministry. It is the highest and most holy night of the conference year in my opinion. Lives are being offered up to God for holy service and true personal sacrifice. We heard them share at the executive session their stories of joy and wonder as they serve the Lord and we are thrilled to have them among us.**

- F. I am here to tell you what you already know: you will encounter a goodly number of trials on the journey (you have already, I'm sure) but God, OUR GOD is surely your strength and your song.**
- II. There are three kinds of trials: The readings for this evening from the Holy Word give us three kinds of perils that pastors and laity face as we serve Christ.**
- A. Personal rejection in time of trouble (First, personal rejection in times of trouble)**
- 1. David was traveling around with a band of companions hiding out from King Saul who was determined to round him up and kill him because he perceived that he was a threat to his throne. David's men were out on a mission and when they arrived home to their base camp they found that it had been raided and their wives, children and possessions had been carried off by the Amalekites. This was, of course, a terrible tragedy. At the time they did not know if their loved ones were dead or alive and David's men were in great distress. Their immediate reaction was to stone David to death. This is the burden of leadership. The buck stops with the leader. Fair or not: if things go wrong you are held accountable.**
 - 2. In times of distress you will face rejection, blame and revolt, even by those you trust the most....those you think are your supporters.**
 - 3. What did David do? It says "he strengthened himself in the Lord."**
 - 4. This is your answer as well. David prayed to God and called on God for strength and guidance for the next steps...which ultimately led to victory. David and the men set out and found the camp of the Amalekites and happily all of the family members and possessions were restored.**

5. Of course it does not always turn out that way. Jesus found himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, deserted by a group of sleeping disciples, his most trusted three, and he prayed earnestly to God to let the cup of suffering pass from him. The Gospel of Luke says that an angel from heaven appeared to him to “strengthen him.” The result of this time of trial was Calvary but in both the case of David and Jesus, the answer came through this time of going to God in prayer for the strength.
6. Might I say... to our shame...yours and mine ...that often it is the last thing we think to do when we are faced with a ministry crisis....we get on the phone, we Google something, we worry, we fret, we sometimes blame and dump but like the people on the escalator we forget to do the obvious, which is to PRAY!
7. How does the hymn go? “O, what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear...all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.”

B. Times of over-work (The second text speaks about over-work)

1. It comes as no surprise that Jesus and his followers were over-worked at the height of his traveling ministry...so much so that they did not even have time to eat. I am sure you have experienced that as well.
2. The anti-dote for burn-out and over-functioning is Sabbath....getting away...Jesus said “come away to a lonely place and rest a while.”
3. It still works for us today and I promise you that unless you take seriously the rhythm of rest and renewal you cannot be there for the long haul. It is the 3rd Commandment...high on the list...and it is a non-negotiable answer to stress and over-work.

4. James Dobson, famous Christian advocate for families, told a story a number of years ago about a time when he had a book contract due and he was working endlessly on this project. He was behind on the deadlines and had not had a day off in weeks. Dobson relates how on one morning when he got up he just stopped everything and took off the whole day to be with his family and missed the deadline. But when he got back to the book it came together in exactly the right way and the Sabbath had made all the difference.
5. This can be our experience too as we take time off and connect with God. I love this poem by one of your retired pastors, Rev. Ted Loder: “Gentle me, Holy One, into an unclenched moment, a deep breath, a letting go of heavy expectancies, of shriveling anxieties, of dead certainties, that soften by the silence surrounded by the light, and open to the mystery, I may be found by wholeness, upheld by the unfathomable, entranced by the simple, and filled with the joy that is you.”
6. May that be your prayer and your answer in times of stress and over-work.

C. Times of Spiritual Dryness (Finally this issue of spiritual drought)

1. The Revelation text is a bone chilling one. It is a reprimand from Christ himself to the hard-working Christians in the early church in Ephesus. These folks worked faithfully, persevered in the midst of persecutions, did not tolerate wicked people, tested the teachings of itinerate preachers, endured hardships and did not even become weary. What’s not to love here? Would that we had a whole conference of churches like this!
2. Then it goes on to say that there is a problem....a BIG problem. They have forsaken their first love. How sad! They

had it all right in their actions and in their works of faithfulness and yet their hearts had grown cold.

3. This too is as modern as the drying ink on the last letter you signed. We often get it “right” by doing the right thing and being right and thinking right and making sure everyone else is as right as we are.... But then we get it **WRONG**. Why? Because we don’t have the love...the love for God in us as the motivator. A spiritual dryness sets in without that deep, passionate soulful love for God. Do you ever feel that?
4. What is the remedy? Revelation gives us one short phrase: “do the things you did at first.”
5. Those of you who are married or have ever been in a serious dating relationship, do you remember those first breathless days of courtship? I remember when I met Mike at seminary we were writing love letters all the time....even though we saw each other every day and had most of the same classes. I remember making him a card and I wanted to illustrate my letter with an autumn leaf. So I found a very beautiful red leaf and glued it on the card with my love letter. Turns out it was poison ivy and Mike is very allergic to poison ivy. That was a love letter we never forgot. But do you write love letters to God? Do you journal? Do you talk to God as a beloved center of your life? That is vitally important.
6. Worship is another answer to spiritual dryness. Do you worship? Really worship? This is a question for pastors and lay people alike. Are we at church on Sunday to truly give God our worship? Do we come to give or to get? When we come to worship... to **GIVE** praise and thanksgiving to God, we are blessed deep in our souls. If we come just to get or be a spectator of a performance then the blessings of personal investment are impossible to receive. Sometimes people say to me they keep going from church to church to find one

where they can be “fed.” I say: go to a church and worship by giving your heart to God and the feeding will come.

7. I love the praise song “I’m coming back to the heart of worship:” by Matt Redman. He said that as his music group was becoming more and more popular, the church services were starting to be more like a performance or a concert. Much attention was being given to all the trapping and the sound system and the “look” of things. The pastor decided to stop all of the “praise concert music atmosphere” while they prayed and fasted and sought guidance for what true worship should be....hence the song:
“I’m coming back to the heart of worship, and it’s all about you, all about you, Jesus. I’m sorry Lord for the thing I’ve made it...when it’s all about you, it’s all about you Jesus. ...I’ll bring you more than a song for a song in itself is not what you have required. You search much deeper within through the ways things appear...you’re looking into my heart.”
8. Worship God with your heart...as you did at first. I remember when I first accepted the Lord at the dorm at Lebanon Valley College. I sat on my bed on that first Saturday morning and felt washed all over by the grace and incredible love of God and I was so happy I could not stop thanking the Lord. It is that heart-warming feeling that John Wesley got on that Aldersgate experience. We need harken back to those early moments of faith on a regular basis and worship God from the heart.
9. We can also cure a dry soul by watering someone else’s soul.....particularly one to whom love is a stranger. There is no lack of bruised and battered people in this world. Lavish the unconditional, unconventional, generous love of God on people and you will experience that heart of Christ once again.

10. Last fall I went to Haiti and happened upon a deaf village that was being pastored by a fledgling deaf villager, who had very little training but a lot of heart. When I got back to the US I contacted a deaf pastor from the Assembly of God Church that I used to work with in Maryland. I sent him down there to work with the Haitian pastor and he has been so thrilled with this ministry that he has gone down two more times in the last 6 months. He has even led a Bible conference and connected the Haitian Deaf leaders with the Dominican Republic Deaf leaders. I have never seen this Assembly of God pastor so on fire in my life since this all came about. He has a deep love for the Lord to start with...but as he has shared with the marginalized people of Haiti that first love of evangelism has once again rekindled in his heart.

11. I love the Emmaus Walk movement for the same reason...It is a weekend retreat where people simply experience the love of God through the team that is filled with love and the team comes home as blessed as the participants. The more you give from the heart the more you are revived in spirit.

12. I hope you will experience the same as you serve God's people using your first love service boots and overalls.

III. Conclusion....so what do you do Ordinands? Pastors? Lay people? Strengthen yourself in the Lord! It will serve you well as you embark on the most amazing journey of your life....strengthen yourself through prayer, through time away with God and through the heart of worship and service. You will be like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season and their leaves do not wither...in all that you do, you will prosper.

