

Sermon Notes for 5/1/16 (Easter 6, Celebrating Seniors Sunday)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Acts 16:9-15

Theme: THE BEST HELP GOD’S PEOPLE CAN GIVE

The Point: God’s greatest help comes through people who have been convinced that a person’s greatest need is for forgiveness and life as gifts from the Lord of all.

Introduction: Some years ago I read the book by James Dobson, *What Wives Wish their Husbands Knew about Women*. I’m not sure I learned everything that I was supposed to know about women, but one story stuck in my memory. Let me quote Dr. Dobson’s story about his son Ryan: “I was at home alone with Ryan one morning when I suddenly realized that it had been approximately two minutes since my little explorer had made any noise. (When one babysits with Ryan, silence is definitely not golden.) I immediately began looking for him, searching each room of the house, but he was not to be found. Finally, I glanced through the kitchen window and saw that Ryan had managed to crawl into the back of a truck which some builders had parked in our driveway. The bed of the truck was taller than Ryan’s head, and it is still a mystery as to how he climbed so high. When I found him, he was trying desperately to get down. He was hanging off the back of the truck from his waist downward, yet his feet were still suspended twelve to fifteen inches above the ground. Seeing that he was going to fall, I slipped up behind him without him hearing me coming and placed my hands outward to catch him when he fell. But as I drew nearer, I heard him talking to himself. He was not crying. He didn’t complain or scream in terror. He was simply probing empty space with one foot and saying softly, ‘Somebody help the boy! Won’t somebody come help the boy?’” (Dobson, J. C., 2010, *What wives wish their husbands knew about women*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale.)

“Won’t somebody come help the boy?” These might have been the words from the mouth of the man from Macedonia as he appealed to Paul in his dream. “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” We don’t know whether this man was a historical character or merely a figure that God placed into the vision to speak to Paul. But the message got across. The man was Macedonian, and he was requesting Paul’s help. Paul was not one to delay in responding to the call of the Lord. Luke records, “When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia. . . .”

Immediately Paul responded to the vision. He did not wait for a few weeks for the weather to improve or for his health to get better or to see if he could get another sign. He crossed over to Macedonia, the place to which God had called him, a place where he had not previously seen himself being active in service. God’s call should be sufficient to move us into action. Do you dare to speak the prayer that many of God’s people speak: “Lord, put someone in my path today to whom I can speak Your Good News. And open my mouth to convey that Good News to that person.”?

Now when Paul was convinced that God had placed a call before him, he had a pretty good idea what kind of help he was supposed to bring. When he went, Paul did not pack his toolkit and plumbing supplies. He did not, to our knowledge, bring his duct tape or his handy-dandy 21-tool Swiss pocket knife. He did not pack up the Tylenol and bandages. We don’t know that he brought along any encyclopedias or books or even any tracts. He knew immediately the sort of help that he could give – the most important sort of help any human being could use. He was convinced that God had called him to proclaim the Good News to the people of Macedonia. “When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.” There was no greater help that Paul could afford to the Macedonians (or to any other group) than to bring the saving message of God’s grace incarnate in the person of Jesus, the crucified but now-risen and reigning Messiah of God.

We should note also that Paul had just gone through some challenging times with respect to his understanding of the will of God. We are told in the earlier verses of Acts 16 (just before today's text) that the Holy Spirit had forbidden him to speak the Word in Asia, and when the apostolic band attempted to enter Bithynia, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them." That sort of thing can be pretty frustrating. Wanting to do something in the name of the Lord, and then being prevented by God Himself from doing it – well, you might wonder whether God knows what He is doing. Maybe Paul was tempted to entertain a thought or two in that direction as well. Does God know for sure what He is doing in this situation? Does He see all the things that I see? (Remember Ananias' reluctance to visit and speak to Saul/Paul?) It sure looks like we could be better off – and the kingdom would benefit – if He would just act in this way or that. We may think that we have a better understanding than God does in this situation.

Have you had the experience that Paul had? Perhaps you were convinced that this particular person was God's answer to your prayer for a spouse – but that person ended up in another marriage. Maybe you were absolutely sure that taking this job was God's answer to your need for work – but the decision ended up being a disaster, and you were out of there in six months looking for another place to serve. Or you just knew that this overseas trip was God's answer to your prayer for direction in life, but it turned out that all you picked up were bad cases of homesickness and seasickness.

Sometimes our experiences are hard to figure out because we do not have the eternal perspective of God. Earl Weaver, former manager of the Baltimore Orioles, tells how he handled his all-star player, Reggie Jackson. Weaver had a rule that no one could steal a base unless he was given the steal sign. This upset Jackson because he felt he knew the pitchers and catchers well enough to judge whether he could steal successfully. So one game he decided to steal without a sign. He got a good jump off the pitcher and easily beat the throw to second base. As he shook the dirt off his uniform, Jackson smiled with delight, feeling he had vindicated his judgment to his manager.

Later Weaver took Jackson aside and explained why he hadn't given him the steal sign. There were some very important strategies that Jackson had ignored. First, the next batter was Lee May, his best power hitter other than Jackson. When Jackson stole second, first base was left open, so the other team walked May intentionally, taking the bat out of his hands. Second, the batter following May was weak against that pitcher, so Weaver felt he had to send up a pinch hitter to try to drive in the men on base. That left Weaver without bench strength later in the game when he needed it. The problem was, Jackson saw only his relationship to the pitcher and the catcher. Weaver was watching the whole game. We, too, see only so far, but God sees the bigger picture. He can see the end from the beginning. We hardly see into the next hour or the next day. When God sends us a signal, it's wise to obey, no matter what we may think we know.

On this Celebrating Seniors Sunday, we have many of our experienced, wise, and practiced saints with us. No doubt many of them could stand here in this place and tell about times when they experienced God's guidance in their lives into a place that they never expected to be, doing things they never expected to be doing, relating to people they never dreamed of meeting – all because they willingly submitted to God's will even when it stood opposed to their own dreams and hopes and desires. And they could tell us how their dreams and hopes and desires ended up being shaped according to God's movement rather than their own agendas. They have the long view that many of us lack.

When we think we know what God is doing, we need to be humble and careful, lest our understanding be proven to be misunderstanding over the long haul. Remember how the disciples of the Lord thought they had some spiritual insight about the man born blind. "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" they asked Jesus. Jesus must have shaken His head a bit about that question as He responded, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." Of course, he did not mean that these three people were sinless beings. He was saying that there was nothing flagrant about their sin that had caused God to respond by

cursing this man with blindness. Jesus pointed them to the outcome of the man's blindness rather than the efficient cause of it: "This happened so that the glory of God might be revealed in him."

Sometimes we fret and agonize over what we have done to cause certain unfortunate occurrences in our lives or the lives of our loved ones. Maybe we forgot to say "knock on wood" or we walked under a ladder or we neglected some childhood warning – and as a result God has cursed our loved ones with cancer or heart disease or dementia. Paul willingly rearranged his human plans to fit with God's bigger plans. That ought to be our focus as well. We do not need to be burdened over trying to find connections between our sins or foibles and others' suffering. We need to focus on what our Lord desires to do through us today, on how he wants to use us to bring help to the lives of those around us.

When Jan Paderewski was about to leave his native Poland to play his first recital in London, he asked an influential compatriot to give him a letter of introduction to a leading figure in Britain's musical world, who might be of assistance should anything go amiss. The letter was handed to him in a sealed envelope. He hoped that everything would proceed smoothly and he would not have to use it. He did not; his debut was a success and no snags developed. Some years later, while going through his papers, he came upon the letter and opened it. It read: "This will introduce Jan Paderewski, who plays the piano, for which he demonstrates no conspicuous talent." (*Bits & Pieces*, January 9, 1992, p. 1- 2) Sometimes the help that we look for from other people ends up being not very helpful. But the help that God sends is always most supportive. When Peter was walking on the lake, suddenly the winds and waves beat against him. He thought that God should send him quieter seas and diminished winds – instead of realizing that the hand of his Savior was all that he needed. When we want our Lord to change our circumstances, we often need to realize that our greatest need is to face those circumstances with faith in His enduring promises, to reach out for His hand and know that He is always near.

Conclusion: A young couple rented a vacation cottage for a week. One afternoon the husband looked out a window at the swimming pool and exclaimed, "Let's change our clothes and go get some exercise!" His wife, who was washing the dishes in the kitchen and looking out the window watching some people play tennis, quickly agreed. While she dressed for a tennis match, he put on his swimming trunks. The window a person chooses to look out at the world often determines that individual's perception of reality. (Lyle Schaller, *Activating the Passive Church*, p. 19) What window are you looking out of today? What perspective have you adopted in seeing the world around and its needs? What is your understanding of the needs of those around you? When we come to the end of life, much of what we thought was so valuable will simply crumble into dust. In that day, we will most need, not our bank statements, not our property deeds, not our wardrobes or our classic cars – we will need and we will desire most of all to know the help and assurance of Jesus, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Looking through the lens of our Lord's kingdom grace and mercy, we can see that God's greatest help comes through people who are convinced that an individual's greatest need is for forgiveness and life as gifts from the Lord of all. Our Lord wants us to adopt His perspective, not to be satisfied with our own limited, imperfect view of things. He desires that we see things through His eyes, that we love others with the passion that He showed in sending Jesus to die for them. He desires that we know that the greatest help we can give is not just to feed, clothe and shelter people (though these ought not to be neglected in our service to our fellows), but the greatest help is to point them to the open arms of Jesus, the Savior who loves and forgives and welcomes us into His eternal embrace. To His honor and praise, AMEN!