

**January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**Isaiah 49:1-7 “You Are Chosen”**

Nobody ever said that following Jesus would be easy. Although didn't Jesus say that his yoke was easy and his burden was light over in Matthew 11:30? True. But when you look at that verse in context, he only seems to offer this easy burden to those who labor and are heavy laden. Over in Matthew 16, Jesus teaches his disciples that if they want to follow him, they must deny themselves and take up a cross. Okay. But which is it? Easy or difficult?

I spent a good number of my years in ministry working for the regional expression of our church. For re-cap's sake, our church has three expressions ... some call them manifestations. There's Congregational, which is local churches like First Christian here in Chico and First Christian in Corning, and Redding, and Paradise, and so forth. Each of these congregations are part of the Regional expression of the church which, in our case, is all of the Disciples congregations in Northern California and Nevada. The General expression of the church is all the Disciple congregations in the US and Canada plus all of our global mission partners. I've worked for two Regional ministries – Part-time here in Northern California as Minister of Search and Call and full-time for 9 years in Virginia as Associate Regional Minister. One of my responsibilities in Virginia was providing staff

support to the region's clergy committee which included the care and nurture of those who are active in vocational ministry and those preparing for vocational ministry. For the most part, it was satisfying and uplifting, but there was a shadow side too. Sometimes it was discouraging to learn just how many people who go into the ministry don't stay there. In fact, the other night Mary and I were talking about how the majority of people in our graduating class who started out in vocational ministry - that is pastors, chaplains, program ministers, music ministers, youth ministers, mission partners, judicatory leaders - have chosen other paths. Same goes for the folks I've worked with in care and nurture. It seems like only about half of those folks have stayed in ministry.

A lot of the folks who we worked with on the clergy committee told us that vocational ministry is sort of like banging your head against a brick wall. Your best equipment is repeatedly damaged, and you don't ever seem to make an impact on the object you wish to move or remodel. Others compare it to the plate spinners you used to see at circuses or old vaudeville shows. If you've never seen them, plate spinners are kind of like jugglers, except the goal is to see how many plates you can keep spinning at the same time on these bamboo poles. It's doable, but you've got to keep on top of things or else the plates will start crashing. Things fall apart quickly if more

plates are added. It's even worse when you're not the one who is adding the plates.

I remember one pastor in training who wrote a reflection paper about what she felt were the biggest challenges in her student ministry. She got sort of poetic and wrote -

I find that I love my enemy, but they still do not change.

I give to the poor and there are still more poor.

I seek to change my behavior, and yet another destructive one emerges.

I strive to make a difference but there is none.

I feel like a failure.

The cool thing is that she stayed in ministry and learned to live and work with those feelings. She's quite successful in fact. Clergy aside, I think we've all felt that way at some level regardless of our vocation, especially those who's work involves guiding people through a transformational process which requires change.

Teachers, medical professionals, coaches, counselors, social workers, public health workers and yes ...

vocational ministers too. These are not jobs. They are not even careers. They are vocations, and the word vocation itself literally means "calling." You've got to have a servant's heart to follow that call, and you've got to be willing to do the hard work, the self-reflection, the

self-care and have the necessary healthy boundaries to continue and succeed.

Our passage from Isaiah today is about a prophet who's vocation or "calling" was to serve. In fact, the section Gary read is often called, "The Servant" or "The Servant's Mission" or "The Servant Song." The servant in this passage is one who was chosen and called even before birth – God formed this servant for the job of bringing Israel back to their creator. He gave the servant a mouth that is sharp and words that are pointed, like a sword, or an arrow-head, or in some translations like a scalpel. It's funny that when we talk about someone who wounds with their words, we talk about how blunt they are. But Isaiah uses the imagery of being too sharp. The servant's words cut. The impact of their words made the people turn against the servant because the people were stubborn and resentful. The result was that not only did the servant fail to make much impact on others' behavior, he got into big trouble himself – he got kicked around. He was despised. The description of this person is classic burnout: "I'm spent, I have labored in vain and for no purpose."

Now comes the hard part. This is where I have to pause and ask: "What on earth was God thinking?" Because in response to this poor, weary, beat-up person who has not seen any positive results for his efforts, God tells him that

his job wasn't really that big, and now he has to step up to the plate in a much bigger way. So much for Israel, let's move on to the rest of the world. Let's go for a global approach! The task was too small, you poor, beaten-up, sad sack – lets make you do something much *more* difficult! What kind of God is this? Is God cruel? Is God a task-master that takes away the servant's tools and then tells him to double his production? Does God not have an accurate understanding of what is going on? Does God just think the prophet is a whiner who needs to be pushed harder to find his extra "inner resources?"

If you turn a blind eye to the *hope* in the text, then yes. God could be any of those things. But that's not the case. This weary, depleted servant proclaims that God is his strength, and he will *trust* God's assessment of the situation. God is his maker, the one who wired him for the task. God knows his strengths and weaknesses, and knows the servant is at a breaking point. By all *worldly* standards, the servant is a failure – there's no dent in the brick wall. But God sees the effort and doesn't count it as a failure. This episode was only *part* of the vision and all is not lost. And the beauty about the partnership between God and this servant is that it is *not* the servant who has to stand on his own. The servant doesn't have to look strong and brave and intimidating. See, it's God's glory that shines through the servant, and it is God's strength that sustains the servant. The flaw of the superhero genre that

we see in comics and movies is that they have to do everything all by themselves. Superman is faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive and is able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. But notice, in the comics and in the movies, even after doing all those heroic things, he still manages to look shiny and handsome at the end of the battle. He achieves everything and he's still standing. But Superman is not real. This servant? The servant *is* real – dirty, disheveled, human ... finite.

The servant struggles to achieve his objective, but God's glory manages to shine through. The servant is spent and has no strength, but *God's* strength is the power that sustains him. If the whole task were up to the servant alone, then we definitely have reason to despair. But it is God who was initiating this work before the servant was even born. It is God who is calling the people back. It is God who is the very salvation for the whole world. The work is God's. We are the ones who, by the power of God's Spirit, are invited to join in this work as we are created to do. We are not Supermen and Wonderwomen out here valiantly trying to save the world. We are humble servants who are strengthened and empowered by the Spirit to enter into the redeeming work of God.

I can't help but feel that as we struggle with the task of being God's people, it helps to know this: As we swing

into a new year and gear up for what awaits us, some of us are hoping it's going to be far less ... bonkers than last year or the year before that. I heard someone refer to January 1, 2023 as, "day 730 of the year 2020." As we look around and see the people that surround us, our family, our friends, and contemplate how we are to be good news to them ... as we look at the floods and landslides here on the west coast and the damage the tornadoes did in the southeast this past week ... as we consider the ongoing devastation of the war in Ukraine and wonder how on earth these communities and countries can be rebuilt and what can we do .... As we see the directions our country takes and wonder how we can make our voices influence the decision-makers ... It helps to know that it is God who restores, and strengthens, and forms us for the task. It is the servant Christ who was spent, despised, and labored for no obvious gain, until being raised to be the light that shines for the whole world, who walks this journey *with* us. It is the Spirit who breathes life, fires us up and gives us visions and dreams of great things. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life we celebrate tomorrow, once said, "Everybody can be great, because anyone can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You need only a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love." May God provide us with food for the journey and grace for

the road as we pick up and set off again, proclaiming the truth that we know.