

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Ezekiel 2:2-5; 2Corinthians 12:7-10; and Mark 6:1-6

In *New Amsterdam*, an NBC drama set in a fictional hospital, the medical director tackles a new systemic problem each week in an innovative, if improbable way. One week, he took on global warming and, unlike the show's usual pattern, did not manage to solve it in one episode. He found that everyone, including himself, has practices that need to change, but no one is willing to do so.

This insight can also apply to our faith lives. We may think it is a great idea to have a relationship with God and live in a loving way; many of us would say we do these things well. Yet the pervasive suffering in the world counters that we have not. Truth be told, it is hard and inconvenient to become fully the persons and community God means for us to be. It will involve suffering and we would be fools to walk voluntarily into that, right? This Sunday's readings lay out the unvarnished truth about our relationship with God, not what we pretend it to be for our convenience.

Ezekiel's "primary purpose is [always] to provoke the audience."¹ In the first reading, as God calls Ezekiel to be a prophet, God underlines the rebelliousness of the Israelites, both past and present: they are "rebels who have rebelled against me.... They have revolted to this very day. Hard of face and obstinate of heart are they." Nevertheless, "whether they heed or resist," God's message must be said. Can we hear in this harsh description of the Israelites' behavior, the pain it has caused God and the commitment God has to love them anyway? God never gives up. One way or another, "they shall know that a prophet has been among them," even as God suffers greatly in the process.

Jesus is likewise a Jewish prophet. He too proclaims the unrelenting invitation to repentance. Today's gospel shows Jesus challenging his neighbors' comfortable perspective and enduring their rejection. They had determined roles for everyone in their community and Jesus' role was that he could not accomplish anything worthy of honor or leadership. He was a *tehton*, a laborer with more training than a field hand, but nothing as advanced as a carpenter as we would use the term today. He was the son of Mary, a widow, not of a living father. Yet here he is interpreting the word of God in the synagogue! Our translation says, "they took offense at him," but the Greek says, "they were being stumbled in him." When the ground is even, we go *our* merry way, but when it is not, we must be more attentive to the path itself. Jesus provokes us to question the way we have framed our world. His neighbors refuse to do so. They can travel no further on the path of faith. Is it the same for us?

In the part of Ezekiel's call we do not read, God gives the divine word to Ezekiel and commands him to eat it. Because the prophet holds God's message in his very body, he will suffer the same rejection God suffers. Those who commit themselves to God quite naturally become prophets, as their lives, full of selflessness and mercy, become a message to others. Herein lies the bitter pill of true conversion: there will be external suffering – rejection by others – and internal suffering, as we confront our own inabilities and sin. The ego is slowly stripped away and we become better and better channels for God's message. This is what Paul is talking about in 2Cor 12, as he battles more public attacks. To understand this awesome and painful process and then to accept it are the great works of the spiritual life. God does this work in us, even as we accept or resist. This kind of change, with all its suffering, upends our comfortable lives. Yet, the truth is "when [we] are weak, then [we] are strong," because we have made room for God. Do we dare inconvenience ourselves so much as to commit our lives to this?

- ❖ What is God calling you to change that seems too inconvenient to do?
- ❖ When have you seen a "weak" person accomplish great good?

©06-30-21 Bernadette Rudolph

¹ Corrine Carvalho. "Ezekiel." *Paulist Biblical Commentary*. 2018. Paulist Press. 735.