

### *Paul's Problem*

Paul had a problem, at least what you and I would call a problem. Actually, it was a big problem, one that very much affected the course of his ministry, and at one point even threatened to derail it entirely. It was no secret. Everyone knew about the problem, at least everyone who had any dealings with Paul, so he never bothered to mention exactly what it was in any of his letters, at least any of those that have come to us. I mean, they all knew what the problem was, so he didn't have to tell them. But because he never says what it was, we don't know, which of course has never stopped people over the years from trying to guess what it may have been.

From what Paul does say, it seems to have been some kind of physical or behavioral problem that at times affected his public demeanor, which has led some to suggest that it may have been a very bad stutter, or some other kind of speech impediment. Others have suggested, on the basis of a single verse in 2nd Corinthians that was part of one of our epistle readings a few weeks ago, that it may have been epilepsy. The fact is we don't know what the problem was, and our guesses are just that...guesses.

But whatever it was, on occasion it made Paul the target of a great deal of criticism and even ridicule, leading some to go so far as to claim the problem was severe enough to raise doubts about Paul's claim to be an apostle. Why would such a problem, what we might call a disability, be grounds for someone rejecting Paul's credentials as an apostle? Because then, just as now, no one expects an apostle, or any other prominent figure in our society, to have a stutter, much less something even more disabling. No, then, again just as now, they expected their leaders to be—and they actually had a special word for this—"god-like." Not gods, but god-like. Not absolutely perfect, but pretty close. Certainly no stutter. Not an apostle.

Now that may sound terribly judgmental, even just flat out prejudiced on their part, but it certainly shouldn't strike anyone as surprising. We do exactly the same thing. Do you think this or any other church would ever call a pastor who had a severe stutter? I doubt it, and yet the most brilliant scholar I've ever known had the worst stutter I've ever heard, a man named Peter Brown. When I was in divinity school, he came to the university to give a lecture and when he stood up to talk I was stunned. Never in a thousand years would I have imagined that a scholar of that magnitude could hardly make it through a sentence. Somehow that just didn't compute, because we expect our heroes to be, well, god-like.

It's the same reason why when we read in Luke the story about Zacchaeus climbing up a tree in order to see Jesus "because he was short," we just automatically assume that Luke means that it is Zacchaeus who was short. Not because there's anything in the sentence structure to suggest that (there's not), but because it would simply never occur to us to picture Jesus as short. No, of course not, our Jesus is tall. There's even a touch of this sort of thing in our gospel lesson for today, the story of Jesus' return to his hometown of Nazareth.

Mark tells us that it was a Sabbath, so as he usually did, Jesus went to the synagogue and spoke to the congregation. He wowed them, and they were amazed, until they realized who he was. Isn't that the carpenter, someone said? Suddenly the tone shifted from amazement to disbelief to anger. Who does he think he is? Why the change? Who imagines their rabbi as a carpenter? Interestingly enough, apparently not even Matthew, because in his account of this story, the crowd doesn't ask "Isn't that the carpenter?"—as in Mark—but rather "Isn't that the

carpenter's son?" Those verses, by the way, are the only two places in the Bible that either Jesus or Joseph is ever called a carpenter.

I think that anyone who works with the disabled will tell you that the biggest problem that they have is not their disability, but the prejudice that others have toward them because of their disability, and all the assumptions then about their capabilities that follow in the wake of such prejudice. That's a problem we all need to be aware of, and do a better job attempting to avoid in our dealings with people with disabilities. But there's a flip side to that problem that may be even more dangerous, and certainly more destructive. For just as we often too quickly presume that those who are disabled are in some measure deficient, so too do we assume that those who embody our ideals of physical prowess and mental acuity are in some measure blessed and possessed of abilities that are, well, god-like.

There's no better example, or perhaps I should say no worse example, of what I'm talking about, than King David. You see, David had it all. He was by all accounts extremely handsome in appearance, a warrior without equal, and a great leader. The people of Israel adored him, because he was exactly what they wanted their king to be, and best of all, he looked every bit the part. He looked like a king, and the greater the heights that David attained, the more invincible he was thought to be.

I don't know how much you know about David, because our lectionary readings in worship cover only a very small portion of the whole scriptural account of his life, which is a shame. A shame because the story of David found in 1 & 2 Samuel is one of the great literary treasures of the Bible, a truly epic and, in the end, tragic story of what might have been. But if you only read little bits and pieces of the story, just the famous stories like David and Goliath, for example, you really don't see the big picture, the whole story including the little signs along the way that David is coming closer and closer to crossing a line, to thinking of himself as invincible, as one who can do no wrong, perhaps even "god-like." Our Old Testament lesson today is one of those little signs, yet interestingly enough, the lectionary selection for today actually omits the critical verses here (2 Samuel 5:6-8), which however we did read.

Here, we learn that David has been crowned king of all the tribes of Israel, and immediately sets out to establish his capital in the city of Jerusalem, a city that up until then had belonged to the Jebusites, one of the many small Canaanite city-states in that region. After capturing Jerusalem, David begins to build up the city, now known as the City of David, with a number of impressive public buildings, the real beginning of the city we think of even today as Jerusalem. But there's a sour note here in the account of David's plans for the city, one little thing that when you hear it, you can't help but shake your head and wonder why did he do that? Because you see, scripture tells us that the blind and the lame were banished from the city of David.

Now there's a reason given as to why that was done, a reason that to my cynical ears sounds more like an excuse than a reason. An excuse in place of the true reason, which I suspect was simply that David just didn't want beggars on the streets of his city, because he wanted a beautiful city, a beautiful city fit for a great king, a beautiful city full of beautiful things. Nobody said anything, because he was the king, the king who had defeated all their enemies, the king who could do no wrong. A king who could do no wrong, that is, until he did. And like a lot of people who think they can do no wrong, when he did, it was a whopper. As we shall see in a few weeks.

Which brings us back to the stuttering apostle, or whatever his problem was, what Paul called a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan sent to torment him. Paul says that he begged the Lord to remove the problem three different times, but each time the Lord refused, and from that point on Paul never spoke of his affliction as a problem again. Not that he called it a blessing or

anything like that, but it was a very valuable and constant reminder for Paul of the fundamental fact of all human life that God's ways are not our ways, that what we think of as power and influence and strength in the long run amount to very little, that what we so often consider god-like has almost nothing to do with the God at all. That in fact, the only truly god-like thing that Paul, or any of us, will ever do is to bear our own cross, whatever it is.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,  
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*