Unwelcome Prophets and Strength through Weakness

It’s a holiday weekend, as we celebrate our nation’s birthday. While the readings in the Lectionary aren’t chosen for our national holiday, and thus aren’t especially patriotic, they do have something to offer, none the less.

In some ways, the passage marking the beginning of Ezekiel’s ministry is quite timely. Here is why I find that true. Being a prophet is our call as well. When baptized, we were baptized to share in Christ’s life and mission, as priest, prophet and king. Like Ezekiel, we Catholics, and all Christians have messages from our faith that are not always well received, in our nation, or even among believers. This reading prepares us for what we may encounter: resistance.

We understand the sacrament of marriage to be a divine institution, with a key purpose, ideally, of creating a home, where children will be blessed with a father and a mother. We know, and the nation has recognized, until recently, that marriage isn’t solely a private matter between two people, how they define themselves, and their personal happiness. There is much more at stake. Now certainly the rights and dignity of all God’s people; what’s best for children; how new rights may impact the social fabric – these are complex issues. Too complex to be settled once and for all by 5 out of 9 unelected Supreme Court justices. Both sides in the argument need prophets who take seriously that we are a nation under God, and God shouldn’t be left out of the discussion, nor can the issue be decided without the welfare of children being central. It is possible to address discrimination in the law, and respect the freedom and choices of those who are gay, without redefining for everyone, through such a split court, what many hold to be a sacrament ordained by God.

We hold that the gift of life is holy, and that life should be protected from conception to natural death. We take God’s commandment about taking a life very seriously. While at one time so did the law of our nation, it no longer does. Yet God calls us to do our best to be witnesses to the sacredness of life. It is an important prophetic stance, even if not well received. Yet give witness we must.

Pope Francis has called us to recognize that God entrusting us with the care of the planet lays upon us a sacred duty. He has also challenged us to take as seriously as Jesus did how our choices impact the poor. Whether folks heed or resist – our role is to witness to where and how we find God in the conversation. That’s what prophets do. So, God telling Ezekiel “let them know a prophet has been among them” applies today, and to our living our call.

The Gospel tells us being a prophet can be especially challenging at home. What parent doesn’t know that! But instead of focusing simply on a Sabbath in Nazareth, I suggest this. Speaking about faith, about our experience of God’s plan, about the message we find in the scriptures, is never simple. But ironically, among family members, neighbors and close friends, it can be even more difficult or touchy. Jesus didn’t get the best response in his home town, but he didn’t give up. So perhaps the Gospel is encouraging us, by Jesus’ example, to not give up. Take heart. We can share with the Lord our challenges in trying to witness to family and friends. He
understands. He has been there. If we listen, he might even have pointers about how to be loving and compassionate, without compromising on God’s call.

And then we have this passage from St. Paul. It is worth every minute we spend reflecting on it. When Paul wrote these words, his relationship with the community in Corinth was very strained. Other preachers had come into town after he had moved on, and basically slammed Paul. They claimed to be much wiser than Paul. They claimed they had power to do greater miracles. They claimed to have a better Gospel. In short, don’t listen to him, listen to us. Instead of going head to head on each count, St. Paul used his head. He meditated long and hard about his life experience. He thought about the thorn in his flesh, whatever that was, and realized it had taught him to depend on God all the more. He thought about his many hardships, and recognized that it wasn’t his stellar performance that led others to Christ, it was Christ working through him even in his weakness. That led him right back to Christ on the cross, and the Paschal mystery. He didn’t need to defend his strengths – he needed to remind the church that his opponents had it all wrong. It is our ability to let God do the driving that counts, not our own self-reliance, greatness, or perhaps arrogance.

I would guess few of us would argue with the first part of God’s message to Paul, namely “My grace is sufficient for you.” Of course! But “Power is made perfect in weakness.” That is hard to understand; it really goes against the grain. To get it, like Paul, we need to meditate on life experience, and on the crucifixion. Jesus on the cross conquered sin and death, by loving even at his weakest moment. What looked to the outside world as helplessness was actually God conquering evil with self-sacrificing love.

At Bible study this week, someone came up with a way to understand how weakness can be so important if God’s power in our life is to shine through. The image or example was especially rich for me, since I’ve experienced it 1st hand.

I almost drowned when I was about 12. The ocean at Rehoboth Beach was particularly rough because of a storm off the coast, and I had gone out way over my head when there was a lull in the surf. (I’ve learned a lot since then.) Soon the lull ended. The waves started pounding me and throwing me under, and I couldn’t catch a breath. It got pretty frantic. My dad tried to pull me out of the heavy surf, but I guess at that point I was fighting too much trying to save myself, and he was having serious trouble. Finally I lost consciousness, and thanks to that, and my not thrashing about when the lifeguard came out, the lifeguard had no trouble pulling me in. By the way, I did survive. Think about it. When we are thrashing about, it is very hard to be pulled out of danger. Often God can be trying to pull us to safety, but thinking we have to save ourselves thwarts God’s rescue attempt.

By the way, I need to say thank you. The lifeguards declared the beach closed and left before I regained consciousness, so I never even saw the one who saved my life. So whoever you were, thank you. And Jesus, thank you for sending him. Who would ever think you can be unconscious, and learn so much!