

My message for this week is a bit short, based on a few mission trip stories, and a couple of readings for this weekend. What's really unusual is that, when asked what my favorite bible story is, today's Gospel is usually the one that I respond with. And while I'll highlight that scripture, my message isn't really wrapped around it.

Story 1:

I don't have a spiritual director that I see. Pastor Mark does – in some ways I'm envious of this, but in some ways, I think "could I open up and speak about things that trouble my heart, my mind, my spirit, with someone who is trained to realize what all these things might mean about me?" So, I haven't gone that route. But I do have several people that I turn to for guidance, direction and mentoring. One of these people, following a bit of time when we were both in a not-so-good place, texted me, "Make it a great day! God deserves it!"

Well, there's a challenge! I've heard "Have a great day" thousands of times, I'd guess. I've heard "Make it a great day," well, a lot. But before that, I'd never heard the add-on, "God deserves it." This is some Holy Pressure! Make it a great day, because God deserves it, as though God had provided everything I needed to make this day great!

And of course, shortly thereafter, while I'm digesting this message, I realize the same thing that I'm hoping you might: indeed, God, who has provided us with all we need, all we are, all we can ever hope to be, does deserve our best. And when we recognize this, and respond accordingly, our days become great.

Story 2:

On the Mission Trip, while it went really well – you’ll hear much more about it in September as we have some of the youth speak – there were challenging moments. Sometimes it was not having the supplies that we needed to complete a task – on one of the sites we were to be drywalling, and we had the drywall, the drywall adhesive, the drywall screws, but no glue gun for applying the adhesive, and for whatever reason, we didn’t get one until a day and a half later – and sometimes we got frustrated with personality differences between our group of adult leaders and the adult leaders we were serving with. And once, at the end of an extremely hard day of work, but a day that we felt could have gone better, as a group of adults, we gathered, and basically ... we gossiped. We talked about the people we were working with – their flaws (as we saw them), their strengths, their quirks (we could do this, because we were blessed to have no flaws or quirks, but plenty of strengths), and while we didn’t go on too long, we might have, except for that Joe Oakland stopped us, almost mid-sentence (I’m pretty sure Joe can stop a refrigerator from running just by looking at it) and called us out. Not in a mean way: he merely spoke about the footnotes of the Bible passage he had been reading during his daily devotions either that morning or the night before, and the scripture itself, that talked about how we should conduct ourselves with regards to others, how we shouldn’t be speaking poorly of our neighbor, how essentially, as our mothers all told us, if we couldn’t say something good about someone, we should just keep our mouths shut. And while Joe didn’t say *these* words, in retrospect, I found it easy to add them: Because God deserves it.

I felt a bit humbled, a bit shamed. After all, I was the Covenant staff person on this trip. I was the Minister of Faith Development. But I was learning from Joe – the same person who later in the week would fill one of our evenings with some spicy stories from his younger days, with both his wife

and his father sitting at the table. I was learning from Joe, and after I got over my feelings of humility and shame, I came to appreciate it.

Story 3:

A bunch of fisherman are in a boat together. They really are uncertain of who they are at this moment. If they truly are fisherman, if that's what defines them, then why are they all in this boat together? Shouldn't they be in several boats, catching fish in different areas of the lake? It doesn't really matter, and they feel secure with one another. Well, and this time, they aren't out to fish – they're simply going to the other side of the lake, because their leader told them to. Yes, that's right, their leader, a man who as it turns out, can change the weather, told them to get into a boat and go to the other side. It's kind of odd that he didn't know a storm was coming. Isn't it? Their leader, who isn't a fisherman at all – but at least he could repair their boat, wasn't he a carpenter in an earlier life? – isn't with them. He went off to be by himself. What kind of leader does that? Well, no matter, he's not very good at catching fish anyway, and we only need to catch a couple – he'll multiply them into a feast – so let's go out and see what we can do.

A storm comes up (and know that then, just as today, violent storms come up on the Sea of Galilee in a hurry, storms with 10 foot waves, storms that you could never predict, storms that would have us heading to the basement) and the fishermen are trapped. They've been out in storms before, and thankfully, have always survived, but they most likely know others who haven't been so fortunate. They can't navigate back to shore – their only hope is to ride it out.

And then ... through the driving rain, through the waves crashing over the side of their boat, they see ... their leader? Could that be? And how's he getting closer? What kind of boat does he have? Wait ... he's ... walking ... on the water? Can that be?

And in the boat, the next-up leader of the fisherman, quite probably next-up because he has the loudest voice of the bunch, and has some discipline issues that no one wants to challenge, says to the man walking on the water: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." If you'd never heard this story, you'd still suspect this wasn't going to end well. But we know the ending: Jesus simply says "come," Peter gets out of the boat, and he's doing it! He's walking on water! But then he notices the storm all around him, and he is overwhelmed, and he takes his eyes off of Jesus, only to return those eyes to say "Lord, save me!" And Jesus saves, calms the storm, and admonishes the disciples: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" And while I think on the inside, Jesus might even have been chuckling, knowing that the series of events and the outcome was quite predictable, knowing that the disciples would have fear, knowing that Peter's faith would fail him, knowing all that he knew, I also wonder if Jesus wasn't thinking, at least a little bit, hasn't your faith come a bit further than this? Doesn't God deserve it? Don't I deserve it?

And we hear this in the words of the Psalmist as well – perhaps in a little different method: "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts." And for me, at least this week, in this time in my life, all I hear is, "Listen to the Lord. Listen to God. Doesn't he deserve it?"

And finally, Story 4: God gets what he deserves. The second to the last night of the mission trip. We're done with our work – we only worked through Thursday, and Friday is going to be a day of rest and fun. Our adult leader ... Mark, not using any judgment whatsoever, tells the kids that there is no lights out time, that they can stay up as late as they want, that the only rules are that they need to be in the upstairs area of the church, and they can't be running around, because the sleeping quarters are downstairs, and those wanting to sleep – that would be the adults – don't want their precious sleep disturbed.

Upstairs, a lot of fun is had for a while, but at some point, one of the youth is getting picked on. A lot. And it's hurting, as it will. I mean, sometimes getting picked on just a little bit is fun, since there is attention being given, but eventually, a line is crossed, and pain sets in. And there's no end in sight, and there's no way to gracefully withdraw from the setting.

But ... one, and then another, and then others, of the youth realize what's going on, and they get angry. "Don't pick on so and so" ... and there is a litany of reasons why it is wrong, and those doing the bullying (and that's a completely appropriate word for this behavior) begin to see that they've crossed a line, that what started out as fun has gone horribly wrong.

In the meantime, the one being picked on has exited. Feelings are damaged, self-esteem hurting – the mission trip can't end soon enough. In some ways, it doesn't matter and couldn't matter that the others have realized the mistakes they have made – the damage is done, and probably can't be repaired.

Or can it? In an amazing turn of events, those who have been hurting this one person, one by one, go and apologize, face to face, with the love of Jesus in their hearts. Reconciliation occurs, and in reality, relationships are strengthened. And ... I don't know if this is important to you, but it sure is to me ... no adults are involved. These amazing youth, who we think might or might not get it, show incredible gifts of compassion and forgiveness, as they work through a difficult situation in a way that makes God proud. God finally gets what he deserves.

My prayer for all of us, today and every day, is that we live our lives in ways that makes God want to shout out, "Yes! That's it! That's what I have in mind for you!" God has given us everything. Let's give Him what he deserves! Amen!