April 3, 2016

“What Does He Have to Work With?”

Mark 16:1-8

**FCF**: Fear of not having a place, of not measuring up

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) As we see that God shows His power through weakness,

(magnet) we will find both deep grounding and soaring encouragement.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

One of the most dreaded sensations has to be when you don’t know where you stand with someone, not knowing if you fit in, have a place, or measure up. After the job interview, the tryout, the audition, the first date, the first day at a new school, the questions start beating inside your head. “*How did I do? What did they think? Was I good enough? Will they take me?*”

Despite what you may have heard, Christianity isn’t like that. There is no measuring up or the tyranny of performance with God. He takes us as we are and works with us from there.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Mark 16:1-8

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

In his book, Three Free Sins, Steve Brown tells a story (READ quote, pp.159-160):

*One of my friends asked a retired, old preacher about heaven. The preacher told my friend that the best thing about heaven would be watching Jesus pick up the church and shake it in Satan’s face. “This is all I had,” Jesus would say, “this bunch of weak, sinful, crazy Christians, and I still kicked your butt!”*

Please don’t let that offend you. When you think about it, it’s really just a funny way of retelling the old Irish proverb, “*God strikes straight blows with crooked sticks*.” Either way, it’s true.

Reflecting on the Resurrection, we started with a question last week. “*What do we have to work from?*” and the solid accounts we have in the Gospels of these events. This week, I want to turn that a bit and ask another question. That being, “*What does God have to work with?*” How does He intend to spread this news and carry forward this work? And who will He use?

This is the season for new superhero films to come into theaters – *Batman vs. Superman*, *Captain America: Civil War*. Both feature quite the lineup. Fantastic weaponry, great strength, blazing speed, astonishing skills and agility. It’s how these heroes show forth their power.

Which raises a question worth asking. “*How does God – no figment of the imagination or fiction of Hollywood – how does the true and living God show forth His power?*” How has He demonstrated and declared that He is determined to manifest Himself in this world? Not through our strength but through our weakness. Not through our strength but through our weakness. And as we see and lay hold of that, we will find deep grounding and soaring encouragement.

1. **REALITY AS TO WHO HE WORKS WITH**

Let’s start with the reality as to who God has demonstrated and declared He works with.

1. *Some Clear Examples*
2. In the text

We have some clear examples. And we need to look no further than our text. Keep in mind how Mark’s Gospel ends. With the fearful, these first witnesses of the Resurrection, fleeing from the tomb. Coupled with the fearful, we have the faithless – a reminder of Peter and his betrayal.

1. In the backdrop

Then in the backdrop, we have the author himself. Mark, as we learn in Acts, was with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. But he left them. In fact, Paul said he deserted them. Then we have the record of really everyone else in the Bible. Abraham, Moses, David – all the major and minor characters – no one comes out unscathed. All have their warts and their mess.

1. *The Deeper Principle*

And that is who God has to work with. Which then takes us to a deeper principle.

1. Paul’s words

Here it’s worth looking now at Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 1 (READ 1 Corinthians 1:26).

1. A summary

Do you hear? This is a complete reversal of standards. This is an utter leveling of standing.

The world’s standards have no eternal significance. None. God is not impressed by our brains, our brawn, or our bank statements. Which then brings this reversal and leveling.

*Illustration:*

For the Church is not the Dream Team. It’s not the Bold and the Beautiful or an ensemble of All-Americans. It’s more like “The Dirty Dozen” – that band of criminals sent out on an impossible mission. It’s “The Bad News Bears” and “The A-Team” – an oddball group of outcasts and rejects. It’s “The Fellowship of the Ring” – a motley assortment going to Mordor.

*Application:*

Now how would this have affected the original readers of Mark’s Gospel? And how should it affect us? As we said last week, the question his abrupt ending forces upon the reader is, “*What now? Where will I go with this?*” Well, I would add that another question it forces upon us is, “*Based on what I’m seeing here, what then does it mean to be a follower of Jesus?*”

Great question. Here’s the answer. We need to see ourselves in them. Know yourself to be one of the fearful and the faithless. Understand that they are you and that you are them. Again, as we see that God shows His power through weakness, we will find deep grounding.

1. **REFLECTIONS ON WHO HE WORKS WITH**

But then also soaring encouragement. So let’s press this a bit further. Let’s look not just at who God works with but some reflections on why. Here again, we need to look at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1 and consider this carefully (READ 1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

1. *To Lay Us Lower*

What is Paul saying here? God works with who He does in order to lay us lower.

1. Preferential treatment

God is determined to stop our misplaced boasting. Note the intentionality. Three times in vv.27-28 we read He “chose.” This is His preferential treatment to the “nobodies” of this world.

1. Kicking out the props

What does this tell us? God is set on kicking out our props, on crashing our pretensions. Why? (READ 1 Corinthians 1:29) We boast in bubbles. And He’s set on popping every one of them.

1. *To Lift Him Higher*

His desire is for us to be laid lower. And for Him to be lifted higher. That all our foolish misplaced boasting would be stopped. And our hearts rightly turned to boast only in Him.

1. His is the work

His is the work (READ 1 Corinthians 1:30). We are united to Christ. He is our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. He is our salvation past, present, and future. His is the work.

1. His is the glory

His is the work. And so His is the glory (READ 1 Corinthians 1:30-31). If those things were because of us, we could boast in us. But since they are not, we can’t. His is the glory. We should boast only in what is boast-worthy. He is the One we must then think of and delight in.

Why does God work with who He does? As in all things, for His own glory. The fact He could and would use any of us is testimony to His power. And His mercy. And His grace.

*Application:*

Now what would the effect of this message have been upon Paul’s readers? What should it be today? If nothing else, it means we have no need to look elsewhere to pump or prop ourselves up. I think of the “testimonies of triumph” that we parade forth from time to time – celebrities, pop stars, or sports figures who saw the light and came to Jesus. And they’re thrust forward as this great proof of the message and we give them a grand platform as though their experience trumps all others. Which does what? It sets them up for failure. Them and us.

A thousand times, no! We are all triumphs of His grace! None more so. And none less so. It takes the same amount of His grace for all of us and each of us. It takes the same blood. And the same Spirit. We are each and all a marvelous testimony of what God has done. Look in the mirror. Look to the person to your left and right. We are each and all triumphs of His grace.

**CONCLUSION:**

So back to our original question, “*What does God have to work with?*” Short answer – ordinary creatures and flawed sinners like you and me. The key thing being that His divine power is most clearly on display through human weakness. That is not the way we are used to thinking. But it is the way He has declared and demonstrated that He will work and move.

What difference should that make? Think of our aspirations and goals. Keep in mind that this is not a matter of the weak becoming strong. Back to our superheroes. Think most of ones like Captain America or Batman. Their stories begin with a secret experiment or arduous training. Something had to happen to each of them so that they could then defeat the enemy and save the world. But that’s not what we see here. Usefulness does not come after transformation. God is not so limited. This is not a matter of the weak becoming strong so that they can then be fit. No, this is His strength shining in and through our weakness. As parents, children, spouses, siblings, and friends. At home, work, church, the market, and the neighborhood. In our serving, loving, forgiving, confessing, and repenting. We remain weak. It’s never our strength but His.

Yes, we should work, labor, strive, and study to grow in our understanding and abilities. His grace should never quench but always be inspiring that. But, in the end, we are still the fearful and the faithless. We are still the crooked sticks through whom only the Lord could strike straight blows. That should deeply and continually ground and humble us. But it should also encourage us and embolden us. And fill us with wonder. For His is the grace and the glory.

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