

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

“And David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.” The Lord be with you. And he shall be called Emmanuel, God with us. I am with you, even to the end of the age. The one thing that God promises us over and over in Scripture is to be there with us. We are promised the presence of God in our lives. So how come it seems like God is so far away sometimes? How can the psalmist cry out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

I have to start with the premise that God keeps God's promises. If God promises to be there with us always, then God will be with us always. So if we feel far from God, it's not because God has moved. You all, I am sure, are familiar with the story of the footprints in the sand. The person who is permitted to look back on his life and sees two sets of tracks in the sand, his and God's. But at the most difficult parts, there is only one set of footprints. “Why did you leave me at my darkest times?” he asks. “My child, those were the times when I was carrying you. And those deep ruts there are when I was dragging you kicking and screaming.”

God is with us. God is with us when we minister to each other. If there are times when God seems absent, it might well be that it is we who have dropped the ball. God calls us to be one body, to build up and support one another. Sometimes we do that really well; other times – not so much. Our relationship with God and with each other is not intended to be a passive one. We can't just sit back and expect God to do all of the work. We have our role to play.

Just look at our gospel reading today. Jesus – Jesus of all people – finds himself unable to do much in a community that has no faith in him. They knew him too well in Nazareth to take him seriously as a prophet. I get it. There are some people who think that I usually know what I am talking about. But if you talk to my wife, Erica, you'll get a different point of view. She knows me. Despite that, she still loves me and is willing to be seen with me in public. It is the same way with God. God knows us, and despite that is willing to be seen with us.

Granted, sometimes God is shaking his head wondering what in the world we think we are doing, but God is still willing to be with us, calling us back to the life we were created to live. Even when we totally disappoint our God and fail to live up to God's expectations, still, God is there with us, offering us forgiveness and another opportunity to make things right. God never gives up on us, even when we have given up on ourselves.

Or worse, given up on others. Our Lord's response to those who refused to hear what he had to say, who refused to accept what he had to give, was not to call down fire from heaven, but amazement. How can they not see what I am offering? But it doesn't anger him. He doesn't see it as a failure, either of himself or of the faith of the people who rejected him. He still loves them. They

are his kinfolk, his friends and neighbors from his hometown. And there is always the possibility of redemption. We have read earlier that Jesus' family thought he was crazy and tried to get him to come home. But his brother James ends up being the head of the church in Jerusalem.

Saul, who persecuted the church, became the one to preach the gospel to the Gentile world. There is always the opportunity for redemption. We never have the luxury of writing anyone off. We cannot say that we have no need of them, as much as we might want to just "unfriend" them from our lives. None of which is to say that we have to torture ourselves by engaging with people who drive us nuts, but we can't just throw up our hands and say to heck with you, either. There is a middle way.

Now some relationships are dangerous. That is not what I am talking about. Some things cannot be redeemed this side of the grave. But we don't have to harbor hate and malice in our hearts. There is a difference between letting go and writing off. Externally, it might amount to the same thing, but inside, in the heart and mind and spirit, it is different. As with so much in Christian life, it is less about what we do as it is the spirit with which we do it.

Not that living the Christian life is easy, and if it is, we are probably doing it wrong. Look at Paul. Paul had an unambiguous call from Jesus to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. And even he had struggles, a thorn in his flesh he calls it. He keeps praying for God to remove it, but God's response is "My grace is sufficient for you." Unfortunately, this is often heard by people to mean just suck it up and stop complaining. Instead, it should be comforting to us. God is with us no matter what we struggle with. We can't expect God to make our lives effortless. It is good to struggle and to overcome. Erica is amazed that I have an app that gives me new algebra problems every day to work. Why would anyone want to solve math problems? Cause it feels so good when you get it right.

The more we struggle and overcome, the more we are able to conquer. One of the prayers in the back of the Prayer Book is for young people. In it we pray that God "help them to take failure, not as a measure of their worth, but as a chance for a new start." The same is true no matter what our age. We are not judged by our failures, but how we respond to failure, both in ourselves and in others because people will fail us. And we will fail others. That's where that whole forgiveness thing really comes in.

There will always be times when we fail, when we fall short, when we don't meet the expectations of God, of others, of ourselves. We will fall short. But we are called to persevere, to carry on because our value is not measured by our success, but in God's love for us, a love that surpasses human understanding. So, even when we feel far from God, God is still near, ready to answer our call and welcome us back into the embrace of our heavenly Father. God grant us the grace to do the same for others. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*