

A few months ago, I was visiting my cousin while she was having tile laid. When I was chatting with the tile guy he told me that he was the pastor of a local church and had started the community food distribution. I had to adjust my perception and no longer see him as just a tile guy but as a rounded human being with special gifts beyond laying tile

In today's gospel reading, Jesus returns home. But he has changed and the village doesn't like it.

I expect many of us have had the experience of re-connecting after a long time with a friend or a family member, or even returning to our hometown and finding it so changed that the old connection is no longer there. For migrants of course that is a particular fear, but here Jesus has returned to Nazareth not from another country, but after starting his ministry. He taught in the synagogue and the people were astounded, but not in a good way. Isn't this the Jesus who worked on the construction crew? Isn't he Mary's son? Who does he think he is, coming and lecturing to us like this?

They were unable to receive Jesus' message because they held him in a particular frame. They saw him as the carpenter, not as a prophet. They were not ready to accept that he had changed and so they could not receive his message nor the gift of healing.

We do the same thing. We hold each other trapped in our past by constantly seeing one another as the person they used to be. Yet we all change. If we truly believe in the power of God's transformative love, we should expect one another to change. That's part of what forgiveness is about, letting the past be the past and moving forward in the hope of something new. One of the things that really helps us to create intentional community together is making the assumption that we are all

coming from good intention. Even when we screw up. Even when we cause unintentional pain, we are intending good.

The tendency of the world is to assume the opposite. When I read an article about someone who committed a crime, I tend to see that person just through the lens of the crime. I don't see all the other aspects of who they are, just their worst moment, their worst behavior. The media is constantly encouraging us to make judgments about people's behavior and usually assumes the worst possible intention and outcome. When we do the same, we hold each other trapped in a negative pattern and we might be missing the gift that change brings. We keep one another small when God may be calling us to go big.

Jesus did not remain stuck in the negativity of his hometown. But neither did he go into the next town and perform a flashy miracle just to get their attention and show them what they were missing. No, instead he starts to encourage his disciples to find their own power as teachers.

We aren't told much about what they were teaching. Just repentance. When we hear repentance, we tend to interpret it from the perspective of the ideas and teachings we have heard most of our lives about how we must repent from our sin and turn to Jesus. But that cannot have been what they were teaching since they were extending the reach of Jesus' ministry and he was preaching about the reign of God, not about himself.

Mark tell us that at the beginning of his ministry Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, "The time has come," he said, "the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News." (Mk. 1:14,15) And that is the basis of the message that the disciples must have taken on, "the kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the Good News."

We can define the kin-dom of God as being what things would be like if God was king instead of humans. Our faith tells us that that is the real situation. God is ultimately in charge though not in a lording it over us kind of way, but in a gentle, guiding, leading, prodding kind of way. When we act as if that is really true, then we start to live in the new creation, in the reality that in God all things are reconciled. Repentance means a change of heart. When we start to live as though the reign of God is a reality, a here and now reality, then we can relax and allow ourselves to be the people we were created to be and start to see others as their best selves.

That's the Good News – that the reign of God is here and now and is real. That whatever the circumstances we can start to live as though that is the reality. We can start to live in the expectation of miracles and in the knowledge that in every circumstance, God is working with us to co-create the outcome which will be of the highest good.

Yet the reading from 2 Corinthians reminds us that everything is not easy and rosy. Probably speaking of himself, Paul talks of having had ecstatic experiences but despite those, there is something that is not right in his life. He is limited. We are all limited as humans, we all have bodies that age and challenge us. We all have tendencies toward ungodly behavior which trip us up.

When Paul talks of a thorn in the flesh, we tend to think of something that pricks from time to time. His actual language is rather more intense and suggests torture, so we might think of bamboo under the finger nails rather than a small splinter. No-one knows what he was referring to. Commentators have suggested that it was his eyesight, which is known to have been poor, others have suggested that he was sexually attracted to other men but, in the absence of any evidence, he might just as well have been engaging with female prostitutes. We simply don't know.

But we do know what our own thorns in the flesh are; there may be an unresolved relationship which continues to eat at you, a work situation that just doesn't quit its aggravation, an addiction or a behavioral challenge which constantly gets in the way.

Even though Paul prayed for this place of wounding to be taken away it was not. Healing happens in the reign of God, but some things remain unhealed and are even torturous. "Why?" Paul asked and he was told. "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

Which takes us directly to the heart of the good news. God stands in solidarity with us in our weakness. Jesus on the cross was at his weakest moment. The cross was not simply a thorn but an instrument of torture. Yet God turned that awful death into a new creation, a resurrection that brings life and hope to the whole of creation. At the heart of the gospel is this paradox, God's power is perfected in weakness.

God's grace is sufficient for us. Whatever the situation, whatever the pain. God's grace is sufficient.

Jesus wasn't able to bring as much healing to Nazareth as he would have liked, because the people were not ready to embrace the reign of God. They weren't willing to see the construction worker as a prophet. But Jesus used that challenge to increase the reach of his ministry by sending his disciples out as teachers. Out of the limitations of the situation he brought new creativity.

It is in the limitations of our humanity that God brings new light. It is in the pain of our lives turned over to God that new beginnings happen.

Whatever happens this week, let us live in the knowledge that the kingdom of God is here and now and that God's grace is always sufficient for us because divine power is made perfect in weakness.