

**Deeds of Power**, a sermon in response to Mark 6:1-13 and 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 by Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, July 8, 2018. (*Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.*)

“Raise your hand if you can tell me something that Jesus Christ *can’t* do?” ... That’s the question a Sunday School teacher opened her class with one morning to see what the kids remembered about last week’s class. The lesson had focused on God’s **omnipotence**:: “God (and that means Jesus, too!),” she had taught, “can do *anything*.” +++ So this week, she was opening with a little tricky test, “Raise your hand if you can tell me something that Jesus Christ *can’t* do?” +++ The teacher was disappointed when Tommy raised his hand – apparently she hadn’t made the lesson clear enough. “Yes, Tommy, what is it you think Jesus can’t do?” ... Tommy replied, “Well, apparently he can’t *please* everybody, because people are **always complaining** about stuff.” +++ +++ The omnipotence of God... It’s one of those bedrock beliefs we all share, isn’t it? We teach it – we preach about it – and we reinforce it... I remember my Sunday School used God’s *omnipotence* to teach us about the mysteries and paradoxes of the Lord (very Presbyterian of them, by the way):: They did it with two questions and answers: FIRST QUESTION: Can God make a rock that’s too big for even God to pick up? (The answer is YES – God *can* do that). SECOND QUESTION: And then could God pick up that rock anyway? (Again, the answer is YES). +++ God **can** ...do... *anything*. +++ SO... I think today’s gospel reading is one of the toughest ones to get our hands around:: **“And he could do ... NO ... Deed ... of Power there...”** In our mind’s eye, it paints an image of Jesus – *helpless* – in his own hometown – like Superman in the presence of Kryptonite. ... What was Mark *getting at* when he wrote that?? +++ ... +++ AND THEN... **Paul** hits us with *another* one in our Epistle reading that seems almost as bad... He writes that he’s plagued with the pain of a thorn in his flesh – a thorn so painful that Paul decides it was sent as a message from *Satan*. He has appealed to the Lord **THREE TIMES** for relief from the pain of the thorn – and God’s answer?? “My **grace** is sufficient for you, for **POWER** is *made* in weakness.” +++ The Thorn stays. +++ These are tough passages. We don’t expect them.

This morning, I’m going to try unpacking these passages with you. We’ll take a close look at them – see if we can follow where they are taking us – and then think about what they mean for *us... Here... Today...*

First, let’s look at the Gospel lesson to figure out just what the problem really is. Jesus goes to his hometown – that’s Nazareth – and he’s doing his usual thing::

Teaching in the synagogue – doing Deeds of Power – and the people are *astounded* ((*at first*)) – but then everything changed. They started remembering Jesus as a boy, “Hold up – isn’t that the carpenter? That’s Mary’s son – he grew up here. He’s no better than we are!!” +++ And then... there’s a short phrase that’s easy to miss... “They *took offense* at him” +++ What does that mean, here, to “take offense?” ... The Greek verb is a form of *skan-dal-ID-zo* – related to the English word “scandalize”. – and it can mean “to offend,” but it also means “to trip up – as a stumbling block – something that gets in the way of faith, or causes you to sin.” This word is used several other times in Mark – *FOUR* times just in Chapter 9, like the warning:: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea...” OR, “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off...” +++ That’s the same word being used in *our* passage. So, the people of Jesus’ hometown weren’t just “offended,” their encounter with Jesus – this young man that had *grown up* with them, and now had power over unclean spirits, sickness, and even death – who preached to thousands of committed followers – their encounter with him becomes a *stumbling block* to their faith – they close themselves off from the idea that he might actually be who all these other people firmly believe he IS... They allow this encounter to rob them of their faith.

And *THAT’S* when Mark tells us Jesus could do no deed of power there – when the people have lost their faith for those petty reasons – *FAITH MATTERS* – and Jesus is amazed, or marvels, at their unbelief. +++ But... *as we continue to unpack this passage*... I’ve got to wonder just what the “Deeds of Power” are that Jesus was not able to do... He’s still laying hands on sick people and curing them – he’s still teaching – that hasn’t changed much, although he does only cure “a few sick people” here instead of hundreds... But, the real difference here is the people themselves – how they respond to Jesus – and their lack of faith. +++ For Mark, I think, the real DEED OF POWER in Jesus’ ministry is **creating faith, generating it** like a machine or a dynamo ((in fact, the Greek word for “Power” is *Doon-a-mis*, related to the English word Dynamo)). +++ Since the beginning of this Gospel – *FAITH in Christ and his message* has been the real – tangible – and most consistent outcome of Jesus’ encounters:: In chapter 1, when he drove an unclean spirit out of a man, Mark writes, “*at once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*” In chapter 2, Jesus heals a paralytic, and “*they were all amazed and glorified God, saying ‘We have never seen anything like this!’*” ... Chapter 3, the **multitude** of people at the seaside, “*all who had*

*diseases pressed upon him to touch him” so they might be healed – and even the unclean spirits fell down as soon as they saw Jesus, shouting, “You are the Son of God!”* ... Chapter 4, Jesus stills the storm that threatens to swamp the disciples’ boat, and *“they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’”* ... Chapter 5, which we just talked about last week – Jesus’ raises a girl from the dead, and his power over life and death *inspires a great crowd to swarm around him – and a sick, fearful, old woman to risk touching his garment to be made well.* +++ See – I think that’s the real Deeds of Power:: it’s what happens when Jesus’ miracles – and people’s faithful response – work together, inextricably, gaining momentum:: people respond to Jesus’ works – and they spread the Word to more people – which leads to more enthusiasm and faith – which makes it spread further...:: Faith and works, each feeding the other – relentlessly generating power from the dynamo that is Christ’s ministry. +++ **Until today** +++ – in Nazareth – +++ where they stumbled – and the Gospel was rejected – and progress of the Good News came to a standstill. +++

So, where do we go from here? +++ How do things get back on track? +++ Well – I think Mark has already given us a roadmap for that:: **We all have a role to play!** Walking through the chapters like we did just now – we see the real, tangible, important role of everyone who encounters Jesus. +++ We matter!! +++ How we respond to him matters!! +++ It is our faithfulness, our love of neighbor, our servanthood, our **enthusiasm for Christ,::** these things give the Word a foothold to climb into the world and into our lives. +++ And when those things are withheld, as they were in Nazareth, the Gospel is hindered. +++ As disciples of Christ – **We matter!!!** +++ **We have a role!!!** +++ We are **part of the story!!** +++  
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**And so**, when Christ gets right back into action – taking his message to other villages that **will** receive his Word, he also calls the 12 together and sends them out two-by-two – giving them authority for the first time – over demons – and to heal the sick on their own – to perform their own Deeds of Power and generate believers. +++ And, Jesus instructs his followers how to avoid getting bogged down like he did in Nazareth:: **Travel light.** - ***The message is for anyone willing to hear it*** – but if the message doesn’t connect, be ready to shake the dust from your feet, and move on to something else... +++ The Gospel is good – and it’s right – and it’s for everyone – but it doesn’t connect to everyone the same way. Be adaptable – even be ready to move away from what has worked in the past, if necessary.

You see – It turns out this whole passage is not about any limits on **Jesus’** power. **It is about calling followers of Christ – like us – to step up as servant leaders. And why it matters!** +++ But our authority – our Power – does not come from within ourselves... We are called to it and empowered for it by Jesus Christ – just like the 12, in our reading... +++ +++ BUT +++ I think one of the hardest things about following Christ – still – is following the instructions he gives the disciples here, when he first called and commissioned them to go out. +++ ***Travel light – Be ready to shake the dust from your feet.*** +++ The POWER of the Gospel doesn’t depend on how *hard* you work on it,... how many hours you put in, or how much skill or talent you have. The POWER of the Gospel doesn’t depend on how smart our plans are – or how well-written our mission statements. ((These things are all great – and it’s important for us to always bring our best for the Lord.)) BUT, the POWER of the Gospel doesn’t depend on our STRENGTHS at all – but on our willingness to follow where Christ leads – just as the 12 *continued to follow* Jesus after he empowered them and sent them into the world. +++ **We** are called to be as well-equipped, prepared, and competent as we can be – and then – as the popular saying goes – to “Let Go and Let God”. +++ Greatness and success?? – Power?? – they come from God – not from ourselves – as we also learned in our Old Testament reading:: “David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was *with* him.”:: Not because David was clever, or courageous, or a good leader (although he was all of those things)... But, David became ***great*** because **he was a man of God’s own heart.**

That’s also what **Paul** is getting at in our challenging Epistle Reading – and it’s something he struggled with himself. +++ **Strength in Weakness.** +++ Let Go and Let God. +++ No one knows if the “Thorn” in his flesh refers to a real thorn – some debilitating physical condition or injury – a spiritual crisis – or even his tendency to rely too much on his own intelligence – his own talents. +++ But I think it’s the perfect image for us as we respond to Christ’s call to go into the community, wielding his **Deeds of Power**, yet remembering that there is **Strength in Weakness**, when we are **hungry to receive the grace of Christ.** +++ **When** questions swirl about our abilities or our commitment – **Christ’s grace is sufficient for us...** **When** we aren’t sure what to do next because we **want** to do **more** but only have the resources to do **less** – **Christ’s grace is sufficient for us...** **When** we think we have the next great idea that will change everything, only to see it fizzle and die a quick death – **Christ’s grace is sufficient for us...** **When** we bump up against each other and chafe in all the usual, expected, places – **Christ’s**

**grace is sufficient for us...** +++ +++ *Let us embrace our weaknesses*, so that the **POWER** of Christ may dwell and grow in us. +++++++  
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I think the joke about Tommy gives more insight into all of this than it might have seemed at first. The reason Tommy thinks Jesus “*can’t please everybody*” has a lot to do with how *we react* to the world as Christ-followers. +++ When we line up and argue about morality instead of humbly accepting the grace of Christ – when our desire to be proven right is greater than our ability to marvel at the wonders of God all around us – *we just can’t* be pleased. +++ **Like the people of Nazareth, we’ve closed our hearts to the work that Christ is doing among us –+++ and for us +++ and through us.**

BUT, the Good News is – Christ *calls* us and *equips* us to leave all that behind; and to be servant-leaders in his name – just like he called and equipped the 12 disciples. +++ He calls us to reconsider **everything** we do as individual Christ-followers, and as a church. +++ Are we ready to prayerfully ask, “Who are the isolated – the wandering – the lost – and the abandoned, in our *communities*? :: *Today*? :: And what are we doing about it?” +++ And will be ready to ask that same question again *tomorrow* – *and the next day*? +++ Are we actively listening to where Christ would lead us – ready to leave behind “business as usual”? – ready to “shake the dust from our shoes” and move on to new ministries? – new missions? – new programming? – new approaches? +++ ***IS THE GRACE OF CHRIST SUFFICIENT FOR US?*** +++ These are the questions for us to ask – and answer together, if we are to find **STRENGTH ... IN WEAKNESS**, and ensure that our DEEDS are, indeed, DEEDS OF POWER – offered – in service to Christ.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.