

July 6, 2003
Season after Pentecost
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Perfect Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:2-10 *Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*

Two images stuck in my mind and heart in the aftermath of the U.S. war on Iraq. One was a photo of one U.S. soldier bending over another who was doubled up in grief at seeing three Iraqi children injured by explosives while playing. The other was a photo in the United Church of Christ newspaper showing an Iraqi man carrying a young Iraqi girl whose feet had been blown off by U.S. bombs. All the boastful rhetoric of war was rendered empty and false against the truth spoken by those pictures.

We are terribly confused about strength and weakness. Our brains are full of aggression, competition, “being right,” winning, being “perfect.” The effects are devastating to our minds, hearts, bodies, relationships, and society. We hate in others and ourselves what we perceive to be imperfections, weaknesses, and flaws. We adopt an unhealthy kind of pride that renders us unable to admit errors, confess sins, or ask forgiveness. I am reading a book entitled THE TWILIGHT OF AMERICAN CULTURE. The book proposes that, as a nation and culture, we show all the superficial evidence of a strong, vital, healthy culture. Public rhetoric is full of pride and boasting. And yet, beneath the surface there is despair and fear. An ever widening gap between the few who are very wealthy and the majority who are the shrinking middle class and the poor. Lack of medical care for so many, a crumbling public education system, especially in poor sectors of the nation, public policies favoring the destruction of the environment, the devotion of our resources for military might rather than human need. All of this gives a sad hollowness to the sea of flags and slogans that boast “the power of pride.” I am reminded of a teaching in the Tao te Ching: “When the country falls into chaos, patriotism is born.”

It is a psychological truism that outward aggressiveness and bravado usually mask insecurities and feelings of inferiority. Feeling inwardly fearful and full of unexamined hurts, we lash out at others. Feeling robbed of dignity or respect, we act out in ways that try to gain a sense of power or recognition. But none of it works. We end up only by wounding others out of our own woundedness, not achieving what we most deeply desire—to love and be loved, to accept and be accepted, in short, to be in community.

These thoughts occurred to me as I reflected on Paul’s words to the Christians at Corinth. The community in Corinth had bought into the culture. They were embroiled in power struggles. There was boasting and bragging about religious experiences and maturity. Paul was dragged into it, with some holding him up as a hero and others tearing him down as a weakling and hypocrite. The spiritual atmosphere in Corinth had become toxic. In his first letter, Paul opened up with this proclamation: “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength...God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Cor. 1:25, 28-29)

In our reading for this morning, Paul comes back to that theme in a more personal way. You wouldn't think so at first. He talks about "knowing a person" who had a fantastic religious experience. Carried up to the "third heaven," this person was, a reference to the view that there were ascending levels to heaven, right up to God's very presence. That's where "this person" was carried in ecstasy.

Two things about this curious story Paul is telling: First of all, he is adopting the language of some "missionaries" who were stirring up things in Corinth with tales of their spiritual exploits—visions, ecstatic experiences, and the like. He wants to say that he, too, knows folks like that. It's something pretty amazing, something one could boast about, says Paul. The second thing is that Paul is really talking about himself. He is the one who had that experience. He is using a common device of referring to oneself in the third person. Paul can boast with the best of them.

However, Paul changes the tone abruptly. "But I refrain from boasting." He CAN boast about such experiences, drawing on them to prove himself, to bolster his position. But he will not. Why? Because such things don't matter. They are not important. They are not what the life of faith is about. By speaking of himself and his own religious experiences in this way, he is distancing himself from them. What really matters, he writes, is what "is seen in me or heard from me," his life of walking the walk and talking the talk of Christ and his love.

Paul could keep on flying to heights of religious ecstasy. But there is something that keeps him from doing so. He has this "thorn in the flesh" given him by God. We don't know what it was. Centuries of scholars have speculated that it was a speech impediment, or a physical ailment or handicap, or a psychological impairment. Whatever it was, Paul wanted God to remove it, to release him from this spiritual ball-and-chain. He prayed to God for release. But God did not take it away. Paul's prayer was not answered, at least in the way he wanted. God was going to leave this chronic pain in the flesh where it was. Paul was "stuck with it."

Paul is saying to the messed-up church at Corinth the same thing he has tried to say all along: being a follower of Christ is not about our being super heroes or dazzling saints or those who are admired by everyone. The life of faith is not about that kind of strength, but about a particular kind of weakness. The weaknesses that bother us so much, the imperfections we wring our hands over, the chronic conditions of body, mind, or spirit that we think hold us back from perfection, are the very channels of God's grace in our lives. God's answer to Paul's prayer for release was: "My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul is not interested in personal perfection or religious heroism or anything that points to the special attributes and achievements of individuals. Paul is interested in our living in such a way that Christ's power dwells in us (v. 9). Our aim is not to try and rid ourselves of our weaknesses, imperfections, and chronic flaws, but to be those in whom God's grace lives and shines through. It's not about us, Paul is saying, but about God's power of love in the crucified Christ. The center of Christian life and faith is not a person in a military uniform, with a gun in his hand, conquering nations. It is not the silk-suited global capitalist garnering more and more of the world's resources. And it is not the religious leader playing upon people's fears, filling them with self-righteousness, holding the cross in one hand and the national flag in the other. At the center of our faith is one who suffered indignities at the hands of political and religious powers, who identified with the hated, sick, and suffering, who allowed himself, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "to be pushed out of the world," and through it all trusted God in all things. It is precisely this "weakness," says Paul, through which the true strength of God poured into the

world and into our lives. It is the “weakness” of mercy, compassion, peace making, reconciliation, servanthood, and forgiveness. It is the “weakness” of God’s love, which is stronger than any human “strength.”

True strength is knowing and accepting our own thorns in the flesh, those things that chronically remind us of our humanity. To be truly perfect—the Greek word *telos* means “complete” or “whole”—means embracing, through God’s grace, the whole of who we are. To be whole and healthy—the meaning of the word “salvation”—we need to receive God’s grace, God’s love, in the areas of our lives where we are most fragile, weak, broken, and powerless.

Perhaps the most damaging thing we can do to ourselves, to others, to our community of faith, is to live out of some notion of “perfection.” We idealize other persons or communities, then lay those expectations on ourselves and others. We then are never satisfied with who we are, with who others are, with the reality of our own community. It is only through loving acceptance of the reality of our lives and our community that God’s power, which is love, can dwell in us.

A young woman had been in a car accident when she was in high school. She was paralyzed, nearly a quadriplegic. Through years of painfully hard work, she was finally able to walk with the aid of a cane. This slow recovery had given her a delightful sense of humor about herself. She would laughingly relate stories of how her physical awkwardness had led to some public embarrassment or another. I began taking her good humor and spirit for granted. One day she came in to talk with me, bringing with her a load of sadness. She had been let go from her volunteer job at a public library because she was “too slow.” After a pause—she often would fall into thoughtful silence before speaking—she said wistfully, “I have always thought that slow was good.” This, too, her thorn in the flesh had taught her, the “slowness” of patience, of carefulness, of attentiveness, of awareness, of appreciation of each movement, breath, sight, and moment of life. When we reject our “imperfections” and those of others, when we go after some ideal of life without flaws or weaknesses, we crowd out what makes us most human, what makes us recipients of the love and grace that are at the heart of life itself. We may “get there” faster, but where is it we are “getting”?

So finally Paul says that he can boast of his weaknesses, because they point him away from himself to Christ. He can be content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities, for the sake of Christ. When he is weak, says Paul, he is truly strong in the strength of God’s love. This is why membership in the Church of the Covenant entails a commitment to be on an inward journey in which we come to allow God’s grace in Christ to embrace our brokenness, our thorns in the flesh. If we are not on that journey of bringing the totality of ourselves into the presence of God’s grace, then we continue to project our dissatisfactions onto others and the community. The time each day we spend in prayer, reflection, and meditation helps us create inner space in which grace-filled acceptance of ourselves and others can grow. The practice of love toward each other is also a channel of this grace in our lives. Nothing is more transformative than unconditional love shown toward us or shown by us toward others. And when it comes to living out the particular mission God has called us to, becoming free of preoccupation with our own strength or power allows us to be open and free channels for what God wants to do through us.

For our own sakes, for our community of faith, our society, our world, let us each practice in our own lives those words God spoke to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness.”