

Sermon for July 8, 2018

“Finding Strength in Weakness”

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

We all like to think we are strong. As Americans we take pride in the belief that the U.S.A. is the strongest nation in the world. We have the most stable government. We have the best laws for protecting individual rights. Our industrial base is still more powerful. And our armed forces are mightier than any Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines on the face of the earth.

But pride in strength is not just a national inclination. As individuals we all like to think that we are strong. One person takes pride in the tone of their muscles or the sharpness of their wit or intellect. Another boasts of the economic power which they have. And those who lack strength in other areas fancy themselves as possessors of inner strength. There are even those who boast of spiritual strength: “I am humbler than thou art!”

Because we take pride in our strength, we boast about it. We boast of our nation's power. We boast of our own personal strength. We boast of the strength of our faith.

We all like to think that we are strong, but in reality, we are weak. It is part of who we are as humans. We were made from dust and we are nothing but dust. A stiff wind could blow us away. The smallest microbe or bacteria can kill us. And we are sustained in a fragile environment which we need to continue to exist. Here on Earth the climate and the pressure and elements in the air are carefully balanced to sustain us. In most other places in the universe we would die instantly.

Despite that reality, we continue to think we are strong. The illusion that we are strong is a psychological defense mechanism. Maybe if we convince ourselves and others that we are strong we don't have to face the truth. The truth being that in things that count, we are really helpless.

Perhaps our boasting is the best evidence for arguing that we are truly weak. If we were strong we would have no reason for boasting. It is because we are weak that we feel a need to convince others and ourselves that we are strong. We are weak and in need of help. But instead of asking for help we boast of a greatness we do not possess. So, we receive no help, because we ask for none.

Paul the apostle knew that he was weak. Not that he didn't have grounds for boasting. He was a Jew among Jews. He was a board certified Pharisee who studied under the great teacher Gamaliel. He had been persecuted for the Gospel: imprisoned, beaten, stoned and left for dead, etc. He even had a vision of the risen Lord on the road to Damascus and the Holy Spirit had given him the ministry of carrying the Gospel of

Jesus to the Gentiles. Some Bible scholars even think that when he talks about a man being taken up to the third heaven and seeing unspeakable things, it is a tongue in cheek way of referring to himself. So, if Paul the Apostle had wanted to boast he had plenty to boast about.

But he also had a thorn in his flesh that constantly reminded him of his weakness. Because of that thorn he knew that he was a mere mortal. Even though he endured great persecution, his ailment always reminded him that his life was held together by a very thin thread. Paul even says that he had prayed to God to take that pain from him. But God left it there to remind him of his mortality.

Paul knew he was weak and that all humanity was just as mortal as he was. But Paul also knew something even more important. He knew that God helps the weak. That is the kind of God, the Almighty is. God cares for those who are in need. This is because God loves. And that love leads God to help the weak. After all it is the weak who ask for and accept God's help.

This led Paul to make some rather odd statements. It led him to boast of his weakness instead of his strength. He knew that it was because of his weakness that God worked in him. His weakness was the basis of God's aid. He said, "I gladly boast of my own weakness that the power of Christ might rest on me." He also said that God's power is made perfect in weakness. How can weakness perfect God's power? It is only when we acknowledge our weakness that God's power can work through us. Only when we say, "Lord, I am weak and need you," can God help us. That is when we are ready to accept God's help.

As the Apostle Paul said, "Our strength doesn't conquer the world, our weakness does." We like to think we are strong. But in truth we are weak. If we persist in the fantasy or illusion that we are strong, we will not accomplish much. We will work and work and get nowhere because we are too weak. But if we admit our weakness, then God can work in us, and the power of Christ will rest on us.

Paul was as great as humans get. He endured much for Christ. He was shipwrecked, imprisoned, threatened by mobs. He faced death over and over for Christ. Through it all he brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ to many. Despite his greatness he didn't boast of these things. He boasted only of Christ and his own weakness.

With this in mind, maybe we should be careful about how we boast. Not just about ourselves but about our nation too. Instead of saying "look what I have done," we should say "I am incapable of doing anything. Look what Christ has done." After all it was Christ's weakest moment, the moment of his death, that conquered sin. As Christians we should take on his weakness. Otherwise we are pretending to be better than him.