

Pentecost 7 (Proper 9), July 8, 2018

Weakness?

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1–10

Other Lessons: Ezekiel 2:1–5; Psalm 123; Mark 6:1–13

Ezekiel 2:1–5

And he said to me, “Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.”² And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.³ And he said to me, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day.⁴ The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’⁵ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.

2 Corinthians 12:1–10

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.⁶ Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.⁷ So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Mark 6:1–13

He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.² And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?”³ Is not this the

carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. ⁴ And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.” ⁵ And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. ⁶ And he marveled because of their unbelief.

And he went about among the villages teaching.

⁷ And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts—⁹ but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. ¹⁰ And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. ¹¹ And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. ¹³ And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

Susan just retired last year and she loved working for Jack Henry and Associates. She was especially blessed with a kind, efficient, and amazingly intelligent boss. There was, however, one part of her job that she did not like, and I might say, almost dreaded. **The yearly performance review.** Actually, most employees have to go through what is something akin to a performance review. I did when I was working as a diplomat in Africa and I am sure that many of you did also. A part of that review may include answering questions like “What have you accomplished over the last twelve months?” and “What are your goals for the coming year?” Now normally those two we can deal with pretty easily. But almost always there is a part of the review that asks us to list our strengths and weaknesses. Strengths are relatively easy: One

can always write something like “hard worker,” “team player,” “conscientious.” Who could argue with those? They’re general enough. But what about weaknesses? Because whatever we write, we’re admitting we aren’t up to par. That we don’t measure up. That we are, well, weak.

No one wants to think of themselves as weak. In our culture, weakness is bad, and strength is good. The physically strong win in athletic competitions. The mentally strong excel in academics.

Having just this week observed the Fourth of July, we celebrated our nation, the freedoms we have, and the military that protects those freedoms. A military that is the greatest, and strongest in the world. Now who would shoot off fireworks because they live in an inferior nation? Ya, strength is good, and weakness is bad. Everyone knows that.

And as a result, we’re taught to cover up anything about us that can be interpreted as a sign of weakness. A father will tell his son who has burst into tears, “Big boys don’t cry.” Because in our culture, crying means weakness. It shows that we’re too fragile. Too emotional. Too vulnerable. Signs of weakness, we are taught, are to be avoided.

But interestingly enough, St. Paul, in our text, tells us that he can

boast in his weakness, because weakness allows the believer to see Christ's power at work in and through His People.

Don't get me wrong. Paul was a man who could be proud of all he'd accomplished. No problem with an annual review for him! He was intelligent. He had a way with words. He had preached to thousands. He was, in his day, bigger than Billy Graham and a dozen other preachers combined. He'd been given a special revelation on the road to Damascus, where he'd seen the risen Christ with his own eyes. And in the early verses of our text, he speaks of another great revelation he had. A vision of being taken up into heaven to see its wonders. Think about how that would look on his resume! Paul: a man given access to the glories of heaven!

But instead of boasting about how great an evangelist he was, Paul tells us that he rejoices instead in his weakness. And he points to one example. A shortcoming, an ailment, or a failure of some kind that he's unable to do anything about. He calls it a "thorn" in his flesh.

Have you ever had a splinter under your skin? Splinters can be annoying. Bothersome. Distracting. They can even get infected. Usually you have to get a needle and tweezers in order to remove a splinter. In our home, Susan is the pro: she's blessed with a steady

hand, a sharp eye, and a gift for removing thorns in the flesh.

But I don't think St. Paul is talking about a splinter stuck under his skin. Instead, we get the idea that it's a bit more serious than that. People have speculated what the thorn St. Paul refers to really was. Was it opposition to his message and ministry? Was it some temptation to which he was particularly susceptible? Was it a physical problem such as poor eyesight or a stutter? We don't know. But we do know that Paul considered it a serious impediment, perhaps even to his ministry. Serious enough, in fact, to pray three times that God would remove it.

Yes, Paul was anxious about this thorn in his flesh. It was, he felt, a distraction that he'd be better off without. But God saw it differently. For God knows that if nothing were ever to go wrong in our lives, we'd begin to forget that we even need him. If we never faced struggles of any kind, we'd begin to think that we could make it on our own. After all, with no problems in life, who needs a problem solver?

There is, of course, one problem, one thorn in our flesh, that on our own we can never do anything about. It is the sin that is deeply imbedded in our flesh. No amount of digging with a needle and tweezers will remove it. No amount of self-discipline can eliminate it. No, we're stuck with it because of who, what, and

where we are: weak, sinful people living in a fallen world, led astray continually by the lord of lies.

Sin is the ultimate sign of weakness. We strive to hold it down, but we're never able to master it. The same "thorns" keep coming back again and again. Like Paul, our sinful human pride tries to make us believe that we are better, stronger than we really are. What sins have you tried to overcome, only to fail over and over? Lust? Laziness? Lack of spiritual energy? Even though we know our God is intolerant of these weaknesses, these failures, and that the consequence of remaining in sin are eternal, still . . . we are utterly unable to stop the sin.

A few years ago I visited a person who had once been a regular attendee here. When I talked to that person, the essential problem was the same as many other non-Christians. "You, meaning us, say one thing and then do exactly the opposite! You condemn violence, you say that one should 'turn the other cheek' but then you blow up in anger when someone does something to you. You turn a blind eye to those in need even though you have plenty, and your language is just as filthy as anyone else's. You hold Jesus up as your great example, but then you fail to follow His example yourselves. You are just a bunch of hypocrites!"

That person is absolutely right. As Christians, we know what we

should do, how we should act, and how we should speak. Then we turn around and utterly fail to do what Christ calls us to do. The reason? We are weak. With St. Paul, we admit: **“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”**

We are plagued by a thorn in the flesh called sin, and we ourselves cannot remove it no matter how hard we try.

But our gracious and loving God didn't leave us to face this thorn in the flesh, this weakness, on our own. In His mercy, He sent His only Son, who put on our weak human form to make the payment demanded for sin. God is, of course, eternal, invincible, and immortal. Death can't touch him. But when He chose to humble Himself and become man, He made Himself vulnerable. Jesus, born of woman, became mortal. And that meant He became weak. Weak enough, in fact, to die.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul tells us that the world in his day saw the cross as the ultimate sign of weakness. The usual response to the Gospel by nonbelievers was this: “How could the all-powerful God of the universe be nailed to the cross to die? That's foolishness!” But Paul responds that even in His weakness, God is stronger than man's strength. By humbling Himself to death, even death on a cross, Jesus accomplished what no man could ever do: using His perfect, unblemished blood as the

atonement, Jesus paid for all the sins of the world. The thorns on His head and the spikes holding Him to the cross won our salvation. Yes, by becoming weak, Jesus conquered Satan and sin for all time. And on Easter, He showed His true strength by also defeating death for each of us, once and for all.

Now, through faith, Christ's power rests upon us. Through our Baptism, the Holy Spirit dwells in us and empowers us to live as servants of Christ. We share His love, imperfectly, even hypocritically, to be sure, but never giving up, using the strength He gives to continue on despite our weakness. It is just as Paul says: **“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”** Christ turns our weakness into strength, using our faults to help us see that we can never win the crown of righteousness on our own ability, so that we must rely on Christ and his power alone. With this truth made clearly evident in us and through us, we use His power to seek, to share, and to serve.

One day, unless Christ returns soon, we'll all face the ultimate sign of the weakness of our humanity: death will come knocking. And while our culture sees death as weakness, for us it takes on new meaning in the shadow of the cross and the open tomb. The cross and grave, signs of weakness to the world, are signs of power for our lives. So to remember the power over death that God promises you, picture this: As your friends and family lower your “weak”

body into the earth, consider what new meaning these words of St. Paul will then have: **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect—made perfect!—in weakness.”**

Amen.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.