

POWER IN WEAKNESS

Epiphany, Westfield; July 4, 2021; Proper 9; 2 Corinthians 12:7-9

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of 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 becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus says, "My power is made perfect in weakness." It's one of the first songs that many of us learned, I guess:

Jesus loves me! This I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong;
They are WEAK, but He is strong.

I remember singing that song at a baptism a long time ago. Little Molly Kate was being baptized. Beautiful little girl, about 7 years old as I recall. She had some rather serious physical and mental disabilities, not because of any birth defect, but because she had been severely abused as an infant and toddler. A family in our congregation had taken Molly Kate in as a foster child and later adopted her. And Molly Kate loved to come to church, and she loved to sing. So on the day of her baptism, we sang "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know."

Later on, Molly Kate became an acolyte. She couldn't actually get up and down the steps and light all the candles on the altar. But we had a special baptismal candle. So when we had a baptism, we would call on Molly Kate. She always needed a little help, but she could light the candle. And she always smiled. It was a beautiful thing to see. Jesus said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Those words were first spoken to St. Paul. In this letter to the congregation at Corinth, Paul is dealing with the problem of what he calls the "super-apostles," itinerant preachers and teachers who have come into town after his departure. These men were slick and sophisticated, winsome and eloquent. They knew how to get things done. But they were preaching false doctrine, a different Gospel, a different Jesus. They were telling the people how they could live a more successful and more spiritual, a higher and holier Christian life. If only they would follow the principles laid down by the super-apostles. They were suggesting that Paul was a weakling, not a real apostle, not as "spiritual" as they were and that the Gospel he preached was inferior. And a lot of the Corinthians were apparently buying into this garbage. It somehow seemed more exciting than the foolishness of the cross that Paul preached. So Paul has to write this letter, defending his apostolic authority. He is a real apostle. He has been called by Jesus and sent by Jesus, and he is preaching the pure Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. And so in chapter 11, right before our text, Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians of all that his service as an apostle has entailed. All of the hardships and suffering. Paul gives us a list: beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, stonings, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst. The list goes on and on. All that he has suffered as an apostle.

And not only suffering, but as an apostle of the Lord, he has been given some special visions and revelations. He tells how he was “caught up to the third heaven...caught up into paradise.” Whether in the body or out of the body he didn’t know. And “he heard things that cannot be told, inexpressible things which man may not utter.” Great revelations from God. Paul was an apostle of Jesus.

But so that he wouldn’t get a big head because of all these revelations, he was also given a “thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass” him. We don’t know what this thorn in the flesh was. There have been various suggestions: migraine headaches or epilepsy or an eye disease or recurring malaria. We just don’t know. But whatever it was, Paul pleaded and pleaded and pleaded with the Lord that it should be taken away. And the Lord answered, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” The thorn in the flesh then was actually a gift, to keep Paul humble, keep him depending on the Lord and not on himself.

God likes to work through weakness. Our Lord’s first disciples were a contentious, competitive bunch, always arguing about which of them was the best disciple, which one would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, which of them would be able to sit at the right and the left of Jesus. And remember what Jesus did? Put a little child in front of them. And He said, “Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” God works through weakness.

We, like those first disciples, are by nature a spiritual DIY people. We like to think that we can handle things on our own. We are big enough, strong enough, smart enough to deal with anything that comes along. But then we run up against reality-- the reality of the devil, who turns out to be way smarter than we are, the reality of the world pressuring us on every side, the reality of our own sinful flesh, always tripping us up despite our best efforts-- the reality of death, which we can’t handle at all. And we find out how weak we are. Which is actually a good thing--that we recognize our weakness.

For, as Paul says, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” God likes to work through weakness. It’s a theme that runs through the whole Bible. One of my favorite Bible stories is the true story of Gideon from the Book of Judges. A very dark time in the history of God’s people. The people of Israel had turned away from the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of the Midianites. Raiders destroying their homes and crops and stealing their livestock year after year. After a while, most of the Israelites were hiding out in caves and dens in the mountains. Finally they cried out to God for help. And the angel of the Lord came to Gideon: “The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor.” And Gideon was a little skeptical: “If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? Looks to me like the Lord has forsaken us.” But the angel said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand.”

And Gideon said, “You’ve got the wrong guy. I’m just a kid from the weakest family in the weakest clan in all of Israel.”

And the Lord said, "I will be with you." So Gideon finally gathered a little army of Israelites together. Pitiful little army actually. And the Lord said, "You've got too many. Tell them that anyone who is afraid can drop out." 22,000 left immediately. They were out of there. So now there were only 10,000. Outnumbered about 13-1 by the Midianites. The Lord said, "Still too many. Take 'em down to the water. Let them have a drink. Those who lap water like a dog, keep them. Send the others home." That brought the number down to 300.

So now Gideon is supposed to fight the Midianites with his 300 dog-lappers. They have no real weapons of war. No shields. No swords. No spears. No armor. No chariots or horses or camels. Each man had only a trumpet and an empty jar with a torch inside the jar. And the Midianites, according to the Bible, were like a plague of locusts (cicadas?) down in the valley and their camels as numerous as sand on the seashore.

But Gideon and his men came down and scattered themselves around the Midianite camp in the middle of the night. And at Gideon's signal, they all blew their trumpets, smashed their jars and held up their torches. And they all shouted, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" (Even though they didn't really have any swords.) And the Midianites, trying to wake up without their morning coffee, surrounded by shouting and trumpet blasts and flashes of light-- the Midianites were reduced to panic and chaos. They picked up their swords and started hacking away at each other. Fighting each other. Killing each other. And those who weren't killed ran away. The Midianite army was completely obliterated. Gideon won. Or rather God won the victory. God who works through weakness.

July 4th today, and we are celebrating the 245th anniversary of our American independence. A lot of flags, a lot of fireworks, a lot of food. As Christians we can certainly give thanks for the many blessings we have enjoyed and still enjoy as Americans, particularly the freedom to come together around God's Word, worship Him, receive His gifts. We shouldn't forget that what we are doing right here would be impossible in many places of the world. So we give thanks!

But at the same time on this July 4th, we can be rightly concerned about the cultural tides that are sweeping across our country--attacks on religious freedom, on marriage and family, on the sanctity of human life. I sometimes find myself worrying about the kind of country my grandchildren will inherit.

A few weeks ago, someone gave me a copy of the book, *Live Not By Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*, by Rod Dreher. The author has the misfortune not to be a Lutheran. But he does make some good points. Dreher believes that we are moving rapidly toward what he calls a soft totalitarianism here in America. A time when it will be risky for Christians to speak the truth and confess a Biblical worldview in our public schools and universities, in our corporations, on our social media, or just about anywhere else out in public. Under this soft totalitarianism Christians, he suggests, will not necessarily be shot or sent to a gulag in Siberia or North Dakota or somewhere. Rather they will be ridiculed, marginalized, censored, and excluded from good jobs and from all positions of authority and influence.

In the face of this looming threat, the church can seem rather weak and ineffective. The real power would seem to lie in Washington DC or Silicon Valley or somewhere out there in our celebrity culture. But certainly not in the Holy Christian Church.

And yet we need to remember the words of St. Paul in our text: "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 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."

God likes to work through weakness. It was in weakness and suffering that Paul learned and we also learn to rely completely on Christ, His work, His mercy, His forgiveness. God has a remarkable way of working through weakness. We see that especially in Jesus Himself.

He was and is the eternal Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father. He was omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient. "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." But there came a time when he chose not to make full use of his divine powers. He voluntarily left behind all the glory of the heavenly Kingdom. He left behind the rainbow-encircled sapphire throne. He left behind the thousands upon thousands of angels and the archangels, the cherubim and the seraphim, who were forever singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." He left it all behind and came to our sin-polluted planet. He came in weakness as a tiny baby in the womb of a small-town girl in Nazareth. He was born in a stable and laid in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. He grew up and was continually surrounded by crowds of dirty, sweaty people pressing in upon him, poor people, sick people, raging demon-possessed people; self-righteous people who wanted to destroy him. "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief... He was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities... Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." Jesus lived and died in weakness.

But God has a way of working through weakness. 2 Cor. 8:9-- "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."

God worked through weakness. He still does. It is in our weakness, in our troubles that we really learn the Word of God. It is in our weakness that we really come to know the grace of God. We hear Jesus say, "My GRACE is sufficient for you." Such a beautiful word. GRACE, the undeserved favor of God. Grace. We are loved even though we don't deserve it. We are forgiven even though we haven't earned it. We have an eternal home with Jesus. By grace alone.

I still think about Molly Kate sometimes. A few years after she began serving as an acolyte, her mother, her adoptive mother, was diagnosed with a terminal cancer. And not long after that she was called to her eternal rest. We had her funeral and then we went out to the cemetery for the

committal service. Molly Kate, I'm sure, didn't fully comprehend all of this, life and death and what the future might hold in store for her. But then again I can't really comprehend life and death, and I don't know what's in the future either. So at the end of the service, we just held hands, Molly Kate and I and the folks who were there, and we sang our old song: "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong. They are weak, but He is strong."

We can't be sure of what the future holds for the church here in America or for any of us as individuals. But we do know the One who holds the future in His hands. He suffered and died in weakness, but now He is exalted on high. All power and authority have been given to Him.

Be assured then that whatever thorn in the flesh you may be dealing with, whatever your sins and failures, whatever weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities you may have experienced in the past or will experience in the future, Jesus is for you. He speaks to you today in the quiet of this hour, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Amen.

