

“The Power of Weakness”
July 4, 2021
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:7-13

I’ve shared before my thoughts that Paul was not only the church’s first theologian but also our first mystic. This passage from 2 Corinthians is what I use to justify that claim. Paul describes there an experience that can only be understood as “out of body.” He says he “knows a man,” but it’s clear from the way he talks that he’s referring to himself. It’s also clear that what he describes isn’t all that unique. He doesn’t feel the need to go into much detail, I think, because this sort of thing was fairly common among holy people of that time. In fact there are other accounts that are very similar from Jewish holy men.

What is unique about Paul, though, is he has no interest in using this experience as a way to burnish his authority. Other people who have been visiting the church in Corinth apparently were using their spiritual experiences to somehow denigrate Paul and call his authority into question. They believed that experiencing God in that way made them more powerful; it meant they should have special privileges and attention. Paul refused to engage in that kind of one-upmanship. Whatever experience of God’s presence he’s had he’s kept to himself, even though I’m sure they must have been a source of strength and encouragement for him.

Instead, Paul focuses on his weaknesses. Even though he’s had this intimate experience with God which might give him some authority, he’s struck with some kind of difficulty, physically or emotionally. Scholars have puzzled for nearly two thousand years over what Paul meant by a “thorn in his side”. No one knows. But it was definitely something significant, possibly painful, that kept him from feeling at ease. Personally, I think he had a vision problem, possibly something like glaucoma. Whatever it was he wanted to be relieved of it and prayed repeatedly for God to remove it from him. But it never happened.

What do we do when we’re in a condition we have trouble tolerating and no matter how fervently we pray for it to end it never changes? That’s the kind of thing that can drive a person to despair. Some people give up on faith altogether when it fails to give them what they’re after. I know how that feels. And I suspect Paul went through some dark night of the soul when he had to come to grips with being disappointed and finding meaning in a condition he couldn’t change. For him, that meaning came through embracing his weakness as a gift and not a curse.

That doesn’t come easily to people like us. We’ve been taught over and over that hanging on to power is our best hope and weakness is to be avoided at all costs. In fact, admitting weakness can be dangerous, putting us at the mercy of people who will take advantage of us. We’re taught to put on a façade of power at all times; no matter what’s happening inside us, the world can only see our strength.

It’s an exhausting way to live and it can lead us into making ridiculous choices. Recently I’ve been reading a book by Heather McGhee titled *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. She describes what she calls “drained-pool politics.” That refers to a phenomenon in the late sixties and early seventies when many

communities across the country chose to drain their public swimming pools rather than allow Black people to have access to them, as ordered by the courts. She says many white people in our country engage in a zero-sum understanding of race relations where any power given to people of color means a loss of power for white people. That attitude has led to all kinds of absurd decisions that have been left everyone diminished.

But if we can embrace weakness and let go of power, we can discover a way of relating to the world that opens us up to God's kingdom in ways we've never imagined. That's part of what Jesus is doing when he sends his disciples out in pairs to roam the countryside taking nothing with them but their faith. He sends them to teach, but of course they're the ones who will learn something as they rely on the hospitality of strangers and put their weakness on display. One thing they'll learn is what it means to live in poverty. When we embrace our weakness we learn empathy, we understand how others might struggle which opens us up to compassion.

When Paul writes the people in Corinth, one thing he's concerned with is their apparent lack of compassion for those among them who are struggling. Compassion is how God's power is made perfect through weakness. Compassion is what makes it possible for us to experience and share the redemption we've found in Christ. Not all of us will have esoteric, out of body experiences of God, but we all have the capacity for compassion if we're willing to be open about our weaknesses and let go of our hold on power.

Jesus sends his disciples out to teach them compassion because he knows, as every true spiritual leader does, that compassion can change the world. By having compassion for those in our society who have been left out or overlooked we can begin to make things right and bring society into balance so we can all move forward together. By having compassion for those in our world who lack resources or struggle for justice, we can direct our efforts toward enhancing other people's lives rather than living in fear of their resentment.

Only the power of weakness makes it possible. Paul understood that and rejected any claim that God favors the strong over the weak. He only needed to look to the example of Jesus who became weak for our sake, to teach us the power of weakness. When we embrace our weakness, cultivate empathy and live with compassion for others we become imitators of Christ. When we relinquish our power, economically, socially, politically, we open ourselves to be molded in the image of Christ and God's power is made perfect in us.

Amen