

Pentecost VI Human Weakness, God's Strength
2 Corinthians 12:1-10 and Mark 6:1-13
July 4, 2021
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"Whenever I am weak, then I am strong," writes Paul to the Corinthians.

Few persons who knew Paul would have called him weak. Paul was bold. His first vocation was as a vigorous persecutor of early Christians. He zealously searched for them. Later, after his conversion, he took the same boldness into his missionary travels. Paul spoke before strangers, Roman officials, and Jesus's original disciples. Paul was smart. He wrote with rhetorical finesse, creating sophisticated theological arguments. He authored some of the most memorable Bible verses: nothing can separate us from the love of God, sin abounds, grace abounds all the more, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, we are all one in Christ Jesus. Paul was a born leader. He planted churches, cajoled disgruntled church members, nurtured the next generation of apostles. Paul was tenacious. He survived shipwrecks, prison, beatings and vengeful rivals. Someone looking at Paul would say, that is one strong man.

Like all of us, though, Paul also had his limitations, his own unique fallible side. An early extra-biblical Christian writing described Paul as short, bald, with crooked legs and eyebrows that met in the middle. Critics reported that while his writings were forceful, "his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible." (2 Corinthians 10:10) For all his strength as a leader, Paul suffered the rejection of some churches he founded, most notably this Corinthian community, who fell under the spell of other apostles offering a flashier brand of Christianity. Called "super apostles," their influence over the Corinthians was of grave concern to Paul. And while his response to them was motivated by a desire to correct bad theology, it was equally clear that the Corinthians defection hurt Paul. It was personally painful to him.

Today's reading places us right in the midst of Paul's defense of his leadership. He terms it a foolish boasting about how God has been at work through him toward them. He tells them of his God-granted vision of paradise, but he focuses his case on the paradoxical experience of finding God's strength made perfect in his weaknesses, a weakness born, he writes, of "a thorn in the flesh."

Paul doesn't describe the thorn, presumably because his readers know of its existence. Using our imaginations we might conjure up a limp born of one leg shorter than the other, an illness whose ravages continue for a lifetime. Maybe Paul developed tendonitis in his writing hand, making it painful to compose those missals so urgently needed by early Christian congregations. Maybe Paul had migraine headaches that made it impossible to preach, or a stutter that made it embarrassing to do. Perhaps he never escaped the agonizing memories of his early work persecuting Christians or another scene of terror or trauma invaded his heart, as well as his head. Whatever the thorn was, Paul attributes its presence to Satan, forces opposing God, and

describes it as a force that hinders his missionary endeavors. The thorn tormented Paul enough that three times he asks for God's intervention, he asks God to remove the thorn.

God's answer to Paul's plea is no. Or, at least, it appears to be a refusal. The thorn, and its regular thwarting of Paul's efforts, remains. Instead, God promises, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

It is a beautiful statement, isn't it? Here is another memorable verse. God's grace is sufficient. But how exactly does this alchemy of divine strength and human weakness work? How do we experience God's grace moving into our stumbling limitations, working through our pain to sustain us – and shine through us – even when or where we feel weakest?

First, Paul's experience provides for us an example of re-directed prayer, those instances where the intent of our prayer receives God's response, even as the specific object or outcome prayed for is not granted. You have had that experience, haven't you? You have prayed for a certain outcome, be it a job, or move or healing or a resolution and found that God did not deliver precisely what you requested. But God does provide for the need living beneath the petition. My mother had a saying pinned to the bulletin board in our family's home that read, "People who pray for miracles rarely receive them. But people who pray for strength to preserve during hardships, ability to forgive the unforgivable, or for wisdom to discern the way, they find they find that they have unexpected strength, new depths of faith, greater trust, more power to love than they ever knew was possible. This dynamic gets close to what Paul is describing when he says I asked for relief, God gave me grace.

Secondly, by naming those enduring, difficult burdens that haunt our lives before God, we are reminded of our dependence upon God. Our lives daily depend upon God. Paul could not pull out the thorn himself. Paul could not escape the impact of the thorn's reverberations upon his life. Paul needed God, daily, to provide when he could not do himself. The act of recognizing our dependence upon God creates openings for God to act within us. When there is more space for God to live within us, then God's power grows stronger inside of us. This is what Paul is describing when he says, whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Lastly, experiencing God's grace in our weaknesses helps us enter into the mysterious lifeforce Christians call Christ crucified and resurrected. It helps us glimpse how the foolishness of the cross becomes the wisdom of God. Letting God's grace sustain the thorniest part of our lives is participating in that mysterious dynamic we call death becoming life. The cross will always be a mystery. The cross will always be a difficult, unfathomable choice to walk toward pain trusting what God can do and we cannot see. But listening for the spaces in our own lives where God says "my grace is sufficient for you in your pain right now" can conform us into Christ's cross-shaped way. Another way to translate the word "thorn" is "stake." Paul is describing a stake in his flesh, akin to the stakes that pierced Jesus's hands and feet. It is here in these crucified places – rather than in the halls of power or the shows of human might – that we encounter the power of God's resurrection, the force that redeems the world, the power that brings us into life.

Prayers met by grace. Our need for God asked by God's deeper presence. A key toward cross-shaped life. Whenever we are weak, then God enters in, making us strong.