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Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater

Ezekiel 2: 1-5; Psalm 123; 2 Cor 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” †

Today we heard Paul tell us, ‘A thorn was given me in the flesh.’ And all of us, at some point in our lives, have been given such ‘a thorn,’ some malady or hardship. Each of us has experienced ‘a thorn,’ whether physical, psychological, or spiritual—be it illness, unemployment, obesity, addiction, depression, unfaithfulness, apathy, or the like. Some of us are blessed to have more than just one. If you don’t think you have, then your lack of self-awareness may just be that thorn.

I’ve spent quite some time this past week, pondering over this passage from Paul to the Corinthians. Paul is defending himself against the so-called ‘super-apostles,’ teachers who stressed a teaching and morality that conforms more to the viewpoint of Greek philosophers, than the teachings of Jesus Christ. These semi-stoics accused Paul of weakness and impurity. They stressed ‘strength’ and the importance of self-control, self-identification, and self-sufficiency... of trying to stay in control when everything around you is falling apart. The root Greek word here, ‘*steno*,’ means ‘holding things together.’ What we hear Paul defending himself against is the opposite, ‘*asthenia*,’ or ‘weakness.’ This word for weakness literally means ‘to come apart’ and it often refers to a state of sickness and disease, or not staying in control in the face of despair, of relying on someone else and not oneself. For the stoics, a display of emotion or attachment was the ultimate human weakness, foolish and useless. For them, the principle of human perfection is to remain dispassionate and in control.

I think this passage is very relevant to us today, given the present state of our nation and our society. For this passage and Paul’s debate reinforce a few basics of Christian theology:

- God’s ways are not our ways
- We are not really in control of our lives or the world around us. Things happen that we simply cannot change, and must learn to accept
- Emotions are not bad, and love is essential to the Christian way of life.
- Being a Christian depends upon our willingness to let go of self and be open to God, to accept God’s ways and not our own, to depend upon God.

God’s ways are not our ways...

The mystery of the Cross reveals the way God *is*, by revealing the way God works in the world. Christ’s suffering and humiliating death hardly seem the action of a powerful and mighty God. Instead, God works in the world through foolishness and weakness (at least as society might measure things), rather than wisdom and might. Christ’s act on the Cross— his loyalty and obedience to God and his willingness to suffer on behalf of others— was the ultimate act of passion and divine love for humanity.

And this also tells us a lot about whom God calls *us* to be, about how God wants *us* to act. This cruciform ('cross-like') principle of *power in weakness* is the heart Christian theology. "Power is made perfect in weakness," that's counterintuitive, and it's countercultural. We've been taught for most of our lives that power comes through strength, success, and money... and Christ's example indicates otherwise.

All of us spend a tremendous amount of time in our lives trying to hide our weaknesses. We spend time, and effort, and money, trying to keep those things we are afraid are 'weak' or 'foolish' about ourselves hidden. These might be our physical appearance, our level of education, our careers, our sexuality, or our lack of physical or financial strength. The world tells us that we need act in certain ways and that we need to follow our own agendas. We set out to get only the best... to purchase things made of only the finest ingredients... we seek to be around people who are beautiful, smart, and powerful... and some of us covet positions of authority or titles (like 'Dr.' or 'Father,' President, CEO, Warden, etc.). We strive for anything that might make us think we are in control of our lives and that help us appear successful. We do so because we think such things will make us feel better about ourselves, stronger....

And the message we hear today from God, through Paul, is that they don't. The message is that we must be open to the Spirit in our lives, we must embrace our weaknesses, not boast in accomplishments and titles. Power is made 'perfect' in weakness; that word in Greek (*teleitai*) means 'reaching full maturity.' When we recognize our weaknesses, realize our limitations, we come to know more deeply the power of Christ within us and around us. Only then, are we able to mature as Christians.

Paul boasts of his weakness, *asthenia*, seeking not strength through his own identity or accomplishments, but in his ability to 'come apart' and rely on others. In this sense, 'weakness' is the ultimate call for all Christians: to be willing to 'fall apart' (emotionally, spiritually, and physically) and be honest about ourselves, to rely on our God and the Body of Christ, our fellow Christians... and to build up one another, growing together in maturity to become who God calls us to be. For true power matures through weakness. And being vulnerable enough to love others and remain open to God's love in them, is the source of true strength.

God tells us, "My grace is sufficient for you." "Therefore, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities... for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

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