

Sermon Pentecost 6B 04 July 2021
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you, brothers and sisters, from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. Let's pray:

As a young lad, I was good at many things. I was reasonably bright, quite an accomplished sportsman, and a good swimmer. I was fit, and not a little proud and cocky. I knew everything and was indestructible, "Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me." God put the brakes on, effectively saying, "Pull your head in!"

As life goes, there're many ways you can be brought back down to earth and shown that you rely on many things other than your own wits. Let me give you two examples:

- I worked for a number of years as a licensed electrical contractor. This involved a lot of work requiring ladders to access work areas. One time, I was at the top of a heavy fibreglass ladder about to clamber onto the roof of a two-storey house, when my shift in weight caused the ladder to twist and it began to fall away from the gutter. To cut a long story short, I ended up with my left hand grasping the live electrical aerial service to the house, my right hand grasping the gutter of the house, my left leg hooked tenuously to the ladder, and my right leg flailing in the air. What could possibly go wrong? If it hadn't been for that insulated electrical aerial cable being well secured to the house, and that gutter being in good condition and firmly fixed in place, I may not have been here today to tell the story.

Might I add that, “My grace is sufficient for you” wasn’t the first thing that came to mind as I dangled in mid-air like a marionette.

The second example, I offer as a way of leading into the main point, and please, feel free to enjoy a laugh at my expense:

- On more than one occasion, I’ve been so focussed on my work that I’ve stepped straight back off a 3-foot step ladder into thin air and crashed painfully to the ground... [Not quite the meaning of living by faith and not by sight]!

Now, I bet you’ve experienced similar things yourselves. One moment you’re walking along without a care in the world and suddenly, you miss a step. You stumble, you twist. You lose your balance. You try to grab something, anything, that you hope is there. And you don’t know whether you’ll stay upright or fall to the ground. A moment of panic.

So, when I see someone suffering a mishap, I don’t laugh; I feel what they’re going through. I remember my missteps and it unnerves me.

That’s one image of a troubled soul. Those times in life when we’ve missed a step or three. We’re agitated, stirred up, going to and fro, back and forth, stumbling and staggering. We feel overwhelmed and powerless to control, fix, or ensure our life or the lives of those we love. The outcome is uncertain. Life is out of whack and we’re off balance. We come face to face with our own weakness. A troubled soul knows it’s weak. The problem is, most of us don’t like being weak.

When has that happened to you? When has your soul been that troubled? What’s it like for you to recognise and feel your own weakness? Do you get scared, embarrassed, ashamed? Do you feel inadequate, defective, vulnerable? Does your pride get bruised? How do you “appeal to the Lord” when the thorn digs deep?

Despite Paul’s incredible faith, you, like Paul, probably also pray something like, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me;” It’s a prayer in which we face our weakness and ask to be saved from it. But what if, like Jesus, we just faced up to and accepted our weakness and lived from it and not in opposition to it; “yet, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42)?

St Paul boasts gladly of his weakness, as though weakness, and not power and wisdom, is God's *modus operandi* (2 Corinthians 12:9). Hang on. God's power is made perfect in weakness? It makes me wonder if there's more to our weakness than we see or trust. What if there's a surprise waiting for us in our weakness? What if weakness makes possible the seemingly impossible? Consider the following:

- Do you remember when you were a child, putting fragile little seeds in a cup full of dirt? There was nothing strong or powerful about those seeds. But remember how surprised and excited you were when you first saw that little, green sprout; life stretching toward the sun.
- I once read an account of a pastor who went blind after eight years of ministry and he was devastated. He could no longer proclaim God's goodness from the pulpit or serve his children as pastors are called to do. He was plunged into the valley of the shadow of death; lifeless and directionless. Definitely a thorn in the flesh, one would want removed. However, his weakness shaped his life in an extraordinary way. He found an avenue for expressing his love for Jesus and his Church, by compiling and publishing many theologically insightful and grace-filled devotions for daily consumption by God's saints. The power of Christ's indwelling shone brilliantly in this blind pastor's weakness, revealing the sufficiency of God's grace.
- I've worked with some rough, tough, and uncompromising men before, who take two steps forward and none back. Huge men who can perform herculean, physical feats. Men whom disdain weakness. I've also witnessed these same men, crying in their beer when faced with the uncertainty of their child contracting a severe, debilitating illness. It changed the way they understood and related to human fragility. It softened their hearts and filled them with compassion.
- Think about the shepherd boy who would one day become, King David. Who in their right mind would have backed David as an odds-on favourite to defeat the giant, Goliath? But David knew that it was God's might and not his own that had protected him from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear and would likewise save him from Goliath too [1 Samuel 17:37]. Who would ever have thought it possible?

And who would ever think of blessing weakness? Well, Jesus does. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who weep and mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the peacemakers [Matthew 5, *The Beatitudes*]. And let's not forget Jesus on the cross, dying, and feeling abandoned. Surely, that's an image of weakness, not strength and power.

Weakness has a way of opening our eyes, ears, and hearts to a different way of seeing, hearing, and living. It shapes our lives in a way that power and strength not only can't, but that sometimes prevent. Weakness gives our lives a Jesus shape.

If Jesus is our way, then our way is weakness. And maybe taking up our cross means taking up our weakness. So, what's your weakness today? Look at what troubles your soul and that's where you'll find a weakness.

What if we stopped trying to overcome our weakness? What if we stopped grasping for power to overcome our weakness? What if, instead, we were to boast gladly of our weakness? What would it be like to just bear our weaknesses, not out of misery and defeat, but with faith and hope in the possibility of the impossible? Isn't that the story of Jesus? Isn't that the story of the Cross? Life is one event of weakness after another that leads to... life. In a nutshell, weakness is the story of the Cross. The Cross is the story of the Gospel. And the Gospel is the story of the good news of God's perfect grace, conforming and transforming human frailty by the power of the Holy Spirit as we grow strong in Christ; from mortality to immortality.

I, for one, am aware that I am perfectly imperfect, which gives Jesus plenty to work on. One bruise, one thorn, one weakness at a time, God is transforming me and each one of you into the perfect image we were originally created in - His.

So, dear friends; embrace your weakness that Christ may grow strong in you this week. To God be all the glory. Amen.

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