

Weakness

July 7, 2024

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

“For someone says, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible.’”

When Paul wrote what we call the Second Letter to the Corinthians, he and the church in Corinth had been arguing both at a distance and in person. He had made what he described as “a painful visit” to the church, and had followed it with “a painful letter,” which doesn’t seem to have survived for us to read. Apparently that had led to the anonymous comment somebody passed along to him: “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible.”

Isn’t it nice when people tell you things like that? Yeah. Not really.

Things were going better by the time Paul wrote this letter, however. Paul’s colleague Titus had visited Corinth and brought Paul a glowing report of improvements in the church there. At least one person whose actions or teachings had disturbed Paul had been disciplined somehow – I rather hope it was the one who made the “weak and contemptible” comment – and Paul promised to come back and spend some better time with people he loved.

Mind you, not all was forgotten. Paul still felt it necessary to remind the Corinthians of his qualifications as an apostle with that mix of hubris and humility visible throughout the apostle’s writings. As Celeste Kennel-Shank writes at *The Christian Century*, “This passage is classic Paul. He fully displays the qualities that make him admirable or annoying, or both at the same time.” He had spent a good portion of chapters ten and eleven boasting of his education, his call, his labors, and his sufferings as an apostle, salting the passage with his realization that the entire exercise of commending himself was foolish.

But was it foolish?

It’s campaign season in the United States of America – residents of other nations might be forgiven for wondering if it’s ever *not* campaign season in the United States of America – and commending oneself is what candidates do. “I’m the best.” “I’m the smartest.” “I have the best ideas.” “I’m right.” American political candidates would not write, as Paul did in the next verse following our passage today, “I have been a fool!” If a candidate has a physical ailment, they minimize or hide it. I leave it to you to come up with examples on our ballots. I’m struck by a subplot of the television series *The West Wing*, about a fictional President of the United States

and his staff. Said President, Jed Bartlett, had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and until forced by circumstances, hid the information from the public and from members of the administration.

I grant you that Hollywood isn't life, but great heavens, haven't we seen this over and over again among politicians and public officials?

In contrast, the Apostle Paul wrote that he suffered "a thorn in the flesh." We don't know for certain what he meant by this. He may have suffered an injury or an illness. He may have referred to a persistent opponent. One theory that has some wider support is that his vision was failing, perhaps originating with his loss of sight near Damascus. We can't really know from what we have.

We don't know what Paul suffered. What we do know is how Paul responded to it.

He took it as a caution not to become "too elated," which reflects some profound self-understanding on Paul's part. His letters reveal an ongoing struggle with ego, pride, and hubris, one which he sometimes lost. He used the "thorn in the flesh" as a psychic and emotional tool to help him contain that monumental ego. As Israel Kamudzandu writes at Working Preacher, "...in our prayer life and faith walk with God, there are some afflictions we have to live with and endure, for in them we will experience God's grace. Deliverance is not just positive and instant, but God's presence in our suffering is the answer we most need."

That "thorn in the flesh" led Paul to prayer, and not just to speaking to God in prayer, but to listening to God in prayer. God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

Of all Christian assertions, from the creative power of God to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, this might be the most profound and the most challenging of all. "Power is made perfect in weakness." Historically, Christians have struggled to live this one. We tend to favor embrace of power. We like the victory psalms of the Old Testament, and the victory stories like the Exodus, David vs. Goliath, the Resurrection. The Revelation to John makes a lot of people uncomfortable, at least up to the end where the forces of God are triumphant and the new heaven and the new earth emerge.

Our hymns resound with triumphant lyrics. "I Sing the Mighty Power of God." "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." We grant remarkable titles to our leaders: "Reverend," meaning "revered one;" "Bishop," meaning "overseer;" and "Pope," meaning "father." When we imagine the coming of the reign of God, how many of us imagine something like a great army of angels marching down from heaven?

But it's funny. That's not what it looked like when somebody said, "the reign of God is at hand."

What it looked like was someone whose power, while evident to others, could be discounted and dismissed by the people he'd grown up with. What it looked like was someone who, while entrusting healing power to his companions, directed them to rely entirely on the hospitality of others for their sustenance and shelter. What it looked like was someone who, though claiming a title of temporal power, Messiah, suffered the humiliating death of a common rebel.

That's what it looks like to see power made perfect in weakness.

The Apostle Paul, for all that he knew what power made perfect in weakness was, and for all his self-awareness, well: I don't think I can say that perfectly succeeded in making power perfect in weakness. I also think he knew it, and I think it annoyed him that he couldn't do it.

I also think he knew that Jesus did do it, and that he rejoiced that Jesus did it, and that he urged us, one and all, to try to do what Jesus did, and I think he knew that we'd probably fail, too.

Let's give it a try, though, to set aside this affection for power. Mahatma Gandhi is reported to have said, "The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace."

As we go through this campaign season, let's decide not based on who will maximize the power of their office, but who will best resist the temptations of that power. As we make our choices for our day's activities, let us choose the things that will lift others up rather than what only benefits ourselves.

And let us be honest about our limits, our ignorance, and our sufferings. In them we find those places through which God's healing power can flow, perhaps to us, perhaps to others, perhaps to the entire world. We may think of them as weaknesses. God thinks of them as the openings for healing.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson