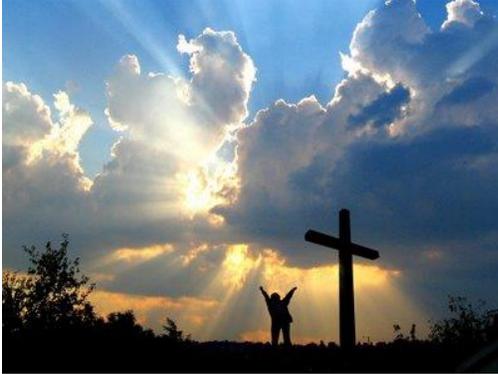


Sermon - July 8, 2018 - Pentecost 7

Rejoice in Weakness?

2 Corinthians 12:1–10



Dear friends in Christ,

May the grace and peace of the Almighty be with each of you.

Our meditation today is based on the Epistle reading of 2 Corinthians chapter 12 where we are told to rejoice in our weakness.

Most employees, at one time or another, have to go through what is sometimes called a performance review. A part of that review may include answering questions like “What have you accomplished over the last twelve months?” and “What are your goals for the coming year?” We dread reviews. And what we may dread most is the part where we have to list our strengths and weaknesses. Strengths are relatively easy: One can always write something like “hard worker,” “team player,” “conscientious.” Who could argue with those? They’re general enough. But what about weaknesses? Because whatever we write, we’re admitting we aren’t up to par. That we don’t measure up. That we are, well, weak.

No one wants to think of themselves as weak. In our culture, weakness is bad and strength is good. The physically strong win in athletic competitions. The mentally strong excel in academics.

Yes, strength is good, and weakness is bad. Everyone knows that. And as a result, we’re taught to cover up anything about us that can be interpreted as a sign of weakness. A father will tell his son who has burst into tears, “Big boys don’t cry.”

Because in our culture, crying means weakness. It shows that we’re too fragile. Too emotional. Too vulnerable. Signs of weakness, we are taught, are to be avoided.

But interestingly enough, St. Paul in our text tells us that he can boast in his weakness, because weakness allows the believer to see Christ’s power at work in and through His People.

Now, this Paul discovered to be true, only after he'd experience Christ's power. Before that Paul was a man who could be proud of all he'd accomplished. No problem with an annual review for him! He was smart. And when he became a preacher, he was an excellent one. He had a way with words. He had preached to thousands. He was, in his day, bigger than Billy Graham and a dozen other preachers combined. He'd been given a special revelation on the road to Damascus, where he'd seen the risen Christ with his own eyes. And in the early verses of our text, he speaks of another great revelation he had. A vision of being taken up into heaven to see its wonders. Think about how that would look on his resume! Paul: a man given access to the glories of heaven! Very impressive!

But here is the real wisdom, instead of boasting about how great an evangelist he was, Paul tells us that in what he really rejoices in is his weakness. And he points to one example. A shortcoming, an ailment, or a failure of some kind that he's unable to do anything about. He calls it a "thorn" in his flesh.

Have you ever had a splinter under your skin? Splinters can be annoying. Bothersome. Distracting. They can even get infected if you don't pull it out.

But I don't think St. Paul is talking about a splinter stuck under his skin. Instead, we get the idea that it's a bit more serious than that. People have speculated what the thorn St. Paul refers to really was. Was it opposition to his message and ministry? Was it some temptation to which he was particularly susceptible? Was it a physical problem such as poor eyesight or a stutter? We don't know. But we do know that Paul considered it a serious impediment, perhaps even to his ministry. Serious enough, in fact, to pray three times that God would remove it.

Yes, Paul was anxious about this thorn in his flesh. It was, he felt, a distraction that he'd be better off without. But God saw it differently. For God knows that if nothing were ever to go wrong in our lives, we'd begin to forget that we even need him. If we never faced struggles of any kind, we'd begin to think that we could make it on our own. After all, with no problems in life, who needs a problem solver?

There is, of course, one problem, one thorn in our flesh, that on our own we can never do anything about. It is the sin that is deeply imbedded in our flesh. No amount of digging with a needle and tweezers will remove it. No amount of self-discipline can

eliminate it. No, we're stuck with it because of who, what, and where we are: weak, sinful people living in a fallen world, led astray continually by the lord of lies.

Sin is the ultimate sign of weakness. We strive to hold it down, but we're never able to master it. The same "thorns" keep coming back again and again. Like Paul, our sinful human pride tries to make us believe that we are better, stronger than we really are. What sins have you tried to overcome, only to fail over and over? Lust? Laziness? Lack of spiritual energy? Even though we know our God is intolerant of these weaknesses, these failures, and that the consequence of remaining in sin are eternal, still . . . we are utterly unable to stop the sin.

I once knew a man who blasted Christians for being hypocritical: "You Christians say one thing and then do exactly the opposite! You condemn violence—you say that one should 'turn the other cheek'—but then you blow up in anger when someone does something to you. You turn a blind eye to those in need even though you have plenty, and your language is just as filthy as anyone else's. You hold Jesus up as your great example, but then you fail to follow his example yourselves. You Christians are just a bunch of hypocrites!" He is absolutely right. As Christians, we know what we should do, how we should act, and how we should speak. Then we turn around and utterly fail to do what Christ calls us to do. The reason? We are weak. With St. Paul, we admit: "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out" (Rom 7:18). We are plagued by a thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7) called sin, and we ourselves cannot remove it no matter how hard we try.

But our gracious and loving God didn't leave us to face this thorn in the flesh, this weakness, on our own.

In his mercy, he sent his only Son, who put on our weak human form to make the payment demanded for sin. God is, of course, eternal, invincible, and immortal. Death can't touch him. But when he chose to humble himself and become man, he made himself vulnerable. Jesus, born of woman, became mortal. And that meant he became weak. Weak enough, in fact, to die.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul tells us that the world in his day saw the cross as the ultimate sign of weakness. The usual response to the Gospel by

nonbelievers was this: “How could the all-powerful God of the universe be nailed to the cross to die? That’s foolishness!” But Paul responds that even in his weakness, God is stronger than man’s strength. By humbling himself to death, even death on a cross, Jesus accomplished what no man could ever do: using his perfect, unblemished blood as the atonement, Jesus paid for all the sins of the world. The thorns on his head and the spikes holding him to the cross won our salvation. Yes, by becoming weak, Jesus conquered Satan and sin for all time. And on Easter, he showed his true strength by also defeating death for each of us, once and for all.

Now, through faith, Christ’s power rests upon us. Through our Baptism, the Holy Spirit dwells in us and empowers us to live as servants of Christ. We share his love— imperfectly, even hypocritically, to be sure—but never giving up, using the strength he gives to continue on despite our weakness. It is just as Paul says: “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (v 10). Christ turns our weakness into strength, using our faults to help us see that we can never win the crown of righteousness on our own ability, so that we must rely on Christ and his power alone. With this truth made clearly evident in us and through us, we use his power to seek, to share, and to serve.

One day, unless Christ returns soon, we’ll all face the ultimate sign of the weakness of our humanity: death will come knocking. And while our culture sees death as weakness, for us it takes on new meaning in the shadow of the cross and the open tomb. The cross and grave, signs of weakness to the world, are signs of power for our lives. So to remember the power over death that God promises you, picture this: As your friends and family lower your “weak” body into the earth, consider what new meaning these words of St. Paul will then have: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect—made perfect!—in weakness” (v 9).

So, can we rejoice in our weakness? No we can’t, it is not that we celebrate our weakness rather we rejoice in Christ, we celebrate Christ, because in our weakness we have power, the power of Christ. And remember that through the power of Christ that overrides our weakness we are able to seek, to share, and to serve.

Trust God’s power, given for you, today and always! In his name. Amen.