

July 5, 2015

II Corinthians 12:1-10: **"I Am Content"**

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As most people see it, weak is not good. We are surrounded by strong athletes, strong personalities, strong minds, strong wills. They are the ones who seem to get noticed and move ahead. They are the ones who are typically glorified and looked up to. We often want to be just like them. Even as Christian people we can get caught up in this kind of thinking: "If my faith is strong, if my prayers are strong, and I am living a strong Christian life, then God will reward me!" We even like the idea that we are stronger than other Christians, which gives us a sense of greatness in the church.

This was similar to the conversation that the apostles had right before the crucifixion of Jesus. It says in the gospel of Luke:

A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves (Luke 22:24-27)."

"Strong is good; weak is bad," so we tend to think. Jesus had to deal with this in our Gospel lesson for this morning. Jesus goes to his hometown and preaches in the synagogue. The people are astonished. Yet, they take offense at him because he is essentially a nobody. "Is this not the carpenter?" they say, "and do we not know his family well?" And Jesus marvels at their unbelief. Again, "strong is good; weak is bad," so we tend to think. It has been so ingrained in us; that's how we act and how we react. And we're ashamed to be weak. But, what about before God? That is an entirely different matter. The words of our epistle lesson for this morning are quite a shock if you are really paying attention.

In the words of Paul we hear something very different than what we are taught in society, in fact, the opposite of what we are inclined to believe and hold onto. It says:

But he [God] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

At first hearing, on the surface, this appears to make no sense at all. But God's way is not our way. What he wants us to realize is that strength within and being self-sufficient is a stumbling block. What appears to be wise is no wisdom at all. If you really want to be strong, truly strong, then be weak before God while understanding that real strength is to be emptied of the self and then to be full of the strength of God alone. What God is saying here is this: "Trust in me! Don't rely on your own strength, which is really no strength at all! Rather, rely on Me. Put your trust and faith and confidence in Me, and I will be

strong for you! My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” With this understanding, we are able now to know that being weak means to trust in God’s strength even in those moments when you are not fully understanding or considering what he is doing in your life.

The people in Jesus’ hometown refused to do this, and the results were not good. When we hang a “Do not disturb” sign on the door of our hearts and minds and then proceed to tell God, “I’ll handle this one!” look out! The results are not going to be good. Maybe we might get what we want in the short term, but what about in the end? It says of the people in Jesus’ hometown, “And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them (Mark 6:5).” If they had been weak before God, there would have been mighty work there!

Consequently, God says, “Be weak! For I am strong for you. I am your strength!” And how does he show us his strength? We see it in Jesus his Son. In Jesus we are reassured that it really is a forever strength even through weakness. It is the struggle of faith against that sinful person inside each of us that is afraid to be weak and wants to be strong! But as we gather at the foot of the cross, we see the truth. The cross is weakness, humility, pain, and death. And there we see the strong Son of God.

There he is hanging in weakness, bleeding and dying. In the weakness of the cross, God’s power is brought to its goal and completion. In weakness, Jesus is a strong savior. In humility, he exalts us. In death, he gives us life. In defeat, we have victory. His condemnation means our forgiveness. And so we know that it is better to be weak than strong before God. It is better to repent than to attempt to defend ourselves. It is better to die and rise, rather than rise and die!

The problem is that we are constantly tempted to rely upon ourselves and our own strength. We like to think that we are strong and worthy. The truth is that we sometimes get arrogant. Because we live in a sinful world and because we are sinful human beings, we frequently need to be reminded of our complete dependency upon God. The apostle Paul serves as a great example. Paul had seen the resurrected Lord. As we learn in our epistle lesson, he was permitted to see the glories of heaven. God sent him to proclaim the Gospel, and he was chosen to write much of the New Testament. But Paul was constantly in danger of thinking that this was from his own strength or self-worth. Consequently, the Lord kept him grounded. It says, “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”

If this is what happened to Paul, then we should not wonder why tribulations and thorns come to us. If we expect good days since we serve God and are his children, we sadly deceive ourselves. God does not guarantee his faithful followers good days, sunshine, and freedom from afflictions in this sinful world. If he gave us everything in this fallen world, we would tend to think that we are worthy. We would become conceited as the apostle Paul became conceited. God needed to remind him of his weakness just as he needs to remind us of ours. In the case of Paul, a thorn in the flesh was given. We do not know what that thorn was, but we do know that God allowed it to keep Paul emptied of himself so he could be filled with Christ. The thorn was a very difficult thing to deal with, and the apostle asked God to remove it much like we might ask God to remove those things that remind us of our frailty.

The answer that Paul received was simply, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” And the apostle acknowledged that God knew what he needed. And with that, Paul boasts of his weakness so that the power of Christ may rest on him. And, even in such circumstance, he talks about being content. He says, “I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Those are really astounding thoughts. How is it that any one of us can be content in the midst of such earthly agonies? How is it that we can be content when we are such weaklings? For the answer, we can turn to the words of Paul in another place in Scripture. In Philippians 4:11-13 he says this:

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

That which strengthens the apostle Paul is “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,” as Paul writes in the proceeding verses. That “peace of God” is Jesus Christ who strengthens us with the forgiveness of sins and the hope of everlasting strength in his glorious kingdom! “I am content because of him” Paul says, “no matter what.” And this is the source of our contentment as well.

We are weak - it is true. But, the forgiveness and strength of the One who was crucified, but now is risen from the dead in glory, who lives and reigns to all eternity – He is our strength. And not only now, but forever. In Him, we have nothing to fear. In Him, it is good to be weak!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott