



Pentecost 7 – Proper 9 (B)

Strength in Weakness

[RCL] Ezekiel 2:1-5; Psalm 123; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

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

Power made perfect, not in strength, but in weakness, says Jesus. “Whenever I am weak, then I am strong,” says St. Paul.

We should have known this would be true when God chose to enter human life not as a king or a conqueror, but as a baby. Sure, the heavenly host of angels was present at the blessed event, but they were singing, “Peace to God’s people on earth,” not, “Look out people, you’re in big trouble now!”

God’s love took on flesh and dwelt among us as a baby—vulnerable, utterly dependent, weak. Our clue that God would use weakness to show strength.

Of course, God was doing that long before Jesus was born. Take, for example, the great story of Gideon, who was told by God to fight against the Midianites. So, Gideon starts to ready the 32,000 troops in his camp for battle.

“Not so fast,” says God. “That’s too many people. I can’t let you win with that many people, because if you do, you’ll all say, ‘Look what we did! Aren’t we great!’ instead of giving me the credit. So, Gideon, say to the people, anyone who doesn’t want to fight, you can go home.”

Twenty-two thousand people said, “Great, I don’t want to fight,” and went home.

So, Gideon said, “Okay, Lord, I got it down by two-thirds, down to 10,000 people. Better?”

God said, “Still too many. Here, try this. Take everyone down to the water and we’ll sift some of them out there.”

So, Gideon took the 10,000 troops down to the water, and God said, “Everyone who just bends down to the water and laps up the water like a dog, put them into one group. Everyone who kneels down and scoops up some water and drinks it from their hands, put them in another group.”

Three hundred men drank water like thirsty dogs. Everyone else drank water more politely from cupped hands. Gideon must have thought, okay, we’ve whittled away another 300. That leaves me 9,700, still a good-sized army.

“Great!” said God. “Three hundred. Yes—that is the right size. When you go into battle with just 300 men, and not the most . . . classy or impressive, shall we say, at that, and you win, everyone will know it’s really me—God—who should get the credit. Your weakness will show my strength” (See the whole story in Judges 7).

Think of David. Samuel is sent to the house of Jesse to anoint one of Jesse’s sons to be king over Israel. When the first of Jesse’s sons is brought before Samuel, Samuel takes one look at him and thinks, “Surely this guy is the Lord’s anointed. He will make a great king.” But God says, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” Six more of Jesse’s strong, tall, strapping, accomplished sons come before Samuel. “Nope, not this one,” the Lord says to Samuel every time. When the whole lineup has passed before Samuel, Samuel says, “You got any other sons? Maybe someone who missed the roll call?”

“There is one more,” says Jesse, “the youngest. But he’s out watching the sheep.”

“Get him,” says Samuel.

“He’s not going to smell so good,” says Jesse.

Samuel says, “God’s got this thing for doing great things through the youngest and smallest, and shepherds too, come to think of it.”

Sure enough, David stands before Samuel and the Lord says, “He’s the one” (See 1 Samuel 16).

In human weakness, God’s strength is shown.

The prophet Jeremiah put it this way, “Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom; do not let the mighty boast in their might; do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

Boast in the Lord. Boast that you have understanding to know the Lord, whose power is made perfect in weakness.

Take Paul. By all accounts, Paul wasn't an impressive man physically. An apocryphal book written many years after Paul lived described him as "Bow-legged, small in size, eyebrows that met, and with a rather large nose." Paul himself says that some people say about him, "His letters are weighty and forceful but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." But Paul didn't let this get him down. And he knew a thing or two about boasting. When he was still known as Saul, he could boast that he did really well in Pharisee school—straight A's, top of his class, headed for great things. He had already brought down several of those Christian heretics and was on his way to Damascus to round up several more—add that to his list of accomplishments—when the risen Lord knocks him flat on his back, blinds him, and gives him a right talking-to about persecuting him—the Lord—when he hurts his brothers and sisters. Saul, totally disoriented, blind, and incapacitated has to be cared for like a baby for three days by the Christians he had planned to haul off to prison. "Okay," says the Lord, "now you're ready."

Ready for what?

More suffering. Shipwrecks, imprisonments, beatings, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities, sicknesses, weaknesses. But all for Christ. So, Paul is one of the most joy-filled and confident people on the planet. He has the power of Christ—not his own power, but God's power, to do God's will, to know and accept God's gift of grace. He got it and wanted everyone else to know that God's gift of salvation is free—*gratis*—grace. There's nothing you can do to earn God's love. You can't earn it, buy it, deserve it. You can only accept it. That's it. Crazy. Ridiculous. Who can love with such wild abandon as not to require a certain amount of accomplishment to get into God's kingdom, self-earned worthiness, deservingness?

"God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength," Paul wrote (See 1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

And God's weakness is stronger than anything else, visible or invisible. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Paul wrote, "Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?" (Romans 8:35)

Add your own: "Shall cancer or divorce or unemployment or heartache?"

"No!" is the answer. Paul continued, "In all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:37-39).

When we are weak, when we rely on the strength of God, we are strong.

What does this mean for us? It means if God asks you to do something, God won't take 'I can't do it' for an answer. God already knows you can't do it. But God's not asking you to do anything on your own. In fact, if you try to do it on your own, you will fail. But "I can do all things through [God] who strengthens me," as Paul writes in Philippians (4:13).

It means we may not get what we want. We may not even get the kind of strength we want, even to do things we think God wants us to do. Paul prays three times that whatever it was he was suffering with might be taken away from him. God told him no. It was more important to learn the deep and abiding truth: lean on God.

Sometimes it takes an experience of great weakness to remember we can throw ourselves on the mercy, love, forgiveness, grace, and strength of God, and find that this holds—that we are held in everlasting arms, the strongest arms, the only strength we need.

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