

Sermon: Pursuing Insults, Hardships, Persecutions and Calamities

Year B, Proper 9

[2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; Ezekiel 2:1-5; Psalm 123; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13](#)

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It's readings like the one today which give Paul a bad name. It's so confusing. So let's slow it down a little bit and see what Paul is saying and then I'll take a stab at what I think it means.

Before we even tackle the text, I want to remind you that Paul started the church at Corinth and he had problems with them almost from the beginning. After he left, it got worse. Some other people, calling themselves Christians, showed up. These super-apostles were much flashier, had a very different message from Paul. We don't know exactly what they said, but it was something along the line of "pay us and we'll teach you how being a Christian will make you richer, more powerful, and more able to fulfill all your earthly desires for food and drink and fooling around." It appears that the basis of the claims for higher authority that these super apostles made was that they had had divine visions, more recently, more vividly. Basically, that their visions were better than Paul's. Needless to say, this drove Paul nuts.

So in the letter we're reading from today, Paul is trying to get the church in Corinth back on track. And he's trying to do it by responding to what he considers the lies the super apostles have been spouting but without playing their game, which is tricky, right? That's part of why the reading is so muddled.

You don't need to look, but if you chose to, the first part of the reading is a big chunk about a guy Paul knows who has experienced heaven and returned to this life remembering that experience. There isn't any guy. It's a vision that Paul had. He's trying to be humble and not claim that *he* had seen heaven. The super-apostles would have said, "hey, we've seen heaven so you should listen to us." Paul's saying he's not boasting about anything he's experienced privately, but if he wanted to, he certainly could.

Next, we get to the thorn in the side thing. There is a ton of commentary on what exactly the thorn is.¹ Eye disease. Not being believed in his own church. You can pick a speculation. In the end, it doesn't really matter. Either Paul is mentioning something that the Corinthians know all about OR it's so private he hasn't told anyone. In either case, he's constantly aware of it, he feels it limits his effectiveness on behalf of Christ and he wishes it would just stop, so in that sense it must be something that not everyone suffers from. I think we all have something like that, something that's a pain and we'd like to be gone, but it isn't.

There is one point I want to make perfectly clear about this thorn in the side section. What I don't hear Paul saying is either: God wants us to suffer OR you just have to live with things that torment you. I don't see either of those as a faithful reading of this passage.

Finally, the reading ends with a list of weaknesses about which Paul *is* willing to boast: insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities (2 Corinthians 12:10). There is a certain irony of Paul talking about not boasting, because, to be honest, he boasts a lot. To be fair, though, he also puts

¹ For a small sampling of theories, see William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975): 257-259.

himself in some tough situations on behalf of Christ, so he's had more than his fair share of insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities.

Paul *is* walking a tricky line in trying to respond to these super-apostles who are totally trashing Paul and his work without getting into a contest of my-vision-is-better-than-yours.² I think that's why the text is so hard to follow. And that's also why it's so easy to miss the point. Because Paul is making an absolutely fundamental point about being a Christian. People like the super-apostles and the people who are attracted to them will not even see it as a thing to be understood, let alone something that you re-arrange your whole life around.

God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9). Power is made perfect in weakness. That's just not right. Power is made perfect in strength. We all know that. It's how this world is arranged. I'm not going to give you examples of how true that is. Just like I won't give you examples about how true gravity is.

In doing my reading for this week's sermon, I came across an article by Dane Ortlund that was very well written, very well argued, very easy to understand. If you'd like to read it, just let me know. I can email it. It's 22 pages long but has a ton of footnotes, so it's not as long as it sounds. The whole reading centers around Power made perfect in weakness.

What Paul is saying, in the middle of all of his talk about boasting, is that God has a preferential option for weakness. Throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, God does not pick the most qualified,³ the strong, the handsome, the powerful, the wealthy to save and to work through. Nor God is indifference to human qualification.⁴ No, God deliberately saves and uses those who are transparently the most disqualified.⁵ So long as the weaknesses are acknowledged.⁶

This is completely counterintuitive, completely paradoxical.⁷ And weakness is really broadly defined, whether it's disadvantages of birth or social standing or moral weakness, like adultery and theft.⁸

Just to take an example from one of the people we're following this summer. Saul was the first king of Israel and he wasn't a very good king. David follows him on the throne, despite not being one of Saul's children. Viewed objectively, both men have weaknesses and strengths and frankly, David's weaknesses are probably greater than Saul's. But David acknowledges them and Saul does not.⁹

We can look at the stories of the Bible, at the stories which reveal God to humanity, and again and again we see God making this choice. Cain over Abel, Moses over everyone else, Ruth who we'll read about later in the year. The prophets speak about this constantly, from mighty Isaiah to little Habakkuk. We step into the Gospels, and it is there again, even before we meet Jesus of

² Chandler Brown Stokes, "Proper 9, Pastoral Perspective, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 208.

³ Dane Ortlund, "'Power is Made Perfect in Weakness' (2 Cor. 12:9): A Biblical Theology of Strength through Weakness." *Presbyterion* 36, no. 2 (2010): 87.

⁴ Ortlund, 87.

⁵ Ortlund, 87.

⁶ Ortlund, 87.

⁷ Ortlund, 87.

⁸ Ortlund, 88.

⁹ Ortlund, 91.

Nazareth. At the beginning of Matthew, Jesus' lineage is laid out. First of all, it has women in it, which in a patriarchal society is incredibly unusual. But it could have had Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah,¹⁰ all the powerful and important women we walked with last summer. They are all in Jesus' lineage. Instead it has Tamar, Ruth, Rahab and Bathsheba, who all highlight some rather problematic episodes in Israel's history.¹¹

This is not God being frustrated because all God had to work with was weakness; no. God is attracted to weakness.¹² This is not God lowering the standards we have to meet to gain God's favor.¹³ God has inverted the standard and has been unfailingly clear about that.¹⁴

However flawed we are, and aren't we all a hot mess, God has given us an odd way out of that weakness. Not self-reliant strength, but acknowledged weakness.¹⁵ Christ has held up that weakness for everyone to see, so there is no missing it, no pretending that only some of us are broken or flawed. No pretending that if we just got rid of the broken and flawed people, we would be fine. Christ has made human weakness plain, and yet has also made it plain that that weakness *is* the way to eternal life, to eternal salvation. When we acknowledge our weakness, we are clearing the way for God's strength.¹⁶

Phew. Right? It is a faithful move to let go of the goal of perfection, of gaining perfect strength by shedding all the imperfect weaknesses. Brother and sisters in Christ, I am telling you that is case.

But hear what else I am telling you. When we gather in God's name, when we form our church, in Corinth, in Brookline, we are called to magnify God's power through weakness in a strength-celebrating world. Everything we do – Blanket Sunday School, Take Home Meals, Senior Luncheons, helping in family emergencies, worship planning, replacing windows, welcoming well lubricated bell-ringers in the middle of a July night – everything we do has to show that we act, we live, in the full knowledge that God's power is made perfect through weakness.

Paul wasn't going to talk about his visions. He believed his authority came from his actions.¹⁷ Paul wasn't going to boast about his strengths, just about his weaknesses. And when you strip away the strengths the church could boast about, you're left with what? Insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. Because that's how a strength idolizing world responds to a community that lives into the reality that God has inverted the standard for all time, that God's power is made perfect through weakness.

So live into the weakness, respond to the weakness, look for God's power in the most transparently unqualified people. And be prepared for insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. And be prepared for salvation and eternal life. God's power is made perfect through weakness. Thanks be to God. Let all of God's flawed children say amen. Amen.

¹⁰ Ortlund, 94.

¹¹ Ortlund, 94.

¹² Ortlund, 107.

¹³ Ortlund, 107.

¹⁴ Ortlund, 107.

¹⁵ Ortlund, 107.

¹⁶ Ortlund, 107.

¹⁷ Stokes, 208.