

Strength of Soul

Second Sunday After Pentecost, June 10, 2012, Jill R. Russell

Texts: 1 Samuel 8.4-20, Psalm 138, 2 Corinthians 4.13-5.1, Mark 3.20-35

What a week this has been! I don't think I ever remember having three funerals in one week. It takes something from you to say goodbye to that many friends in so short a time and I understand that some of you were doing that hard work of grief in other places as well beyond the funerals for Elsie Lamb, Frank Sherburne and David Klooster.

It was just after hearing that Frank had died that I read again the Psalm for this day and the third verse stood out in bold: "On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul." That became my prayer for those who are hurting this week (for myself included): for strength of soul. Not just energy and not just stamina. You can find those things in a cup of coffee or a power nap. But strength of soul—that is something altogether different. That is what gives you the ability to face the day when the person that you love is no longer beside you. That is what gives you the capacity to face your grief and anger without the fear of being consumed by it. That is what fuels conviction beyond convenience and allows for a lifetime of determined service. I realized that strength of soul was part of what I admired in the saints that we buried this week. And I found myself wondering as the week went by what makes possible that kind of strength? Are you born with it? Is it happenstance? Or is there a way to develop that strength?

The Health Ministry has encouraged us to set fitness goals for the summer. When we first began talking about this idea I knew my husband, Andrew, would be all about it. He loves figuring out how to build strength and set goals. When Cassidy wanted to ride a big kid bike before she was truly ready, he put her on a training regime with her tricycle to build up her leg strength so that by the time she turned 4 she would strong enough to handle a big kid bike. And sure enough she was. You should see this spreadsheet Andrew uses to plan his workouts each week. When he set his mind to getting as strong as he could get he did these measurements with the weight machines to calculate the precise distance he was lifting the weights in order to create a training plan to generate the maximum

strength he could build. It was the perfect intersection of tasks for this health conscious physics geek.

I found myself this week wondering is there an equivalent equation we can take up to build the strength of our souls - to be prepared when life demands more from us than we feel ready to face? Noticing the language of the Psalm dashed any hopes of finding a simple formula. It wasn't something the Psalmist did. It was something God provided: "On the day I called, YOU answered me, YOU increased the strength of my soul." And I realized that was the counsel I had been offering to someone recently who worried about their capacity to have what it takes to be there to the end of what was inevitably going to be a long season of suffering. I kept saying that I had no way of knowing what the future would hold – no promises I could make about the outcome of their struggle—all that I could say with certainty was that I trusted the Spirit of God to give them strength beyond their expectation. And so far God has been faithful to that promise.

In some ways it is frustrating to have to rely on grace! I don't know about you but I prefer to do what I can to prepare myself for challenges I need to meet. If there is information I need then let me do the research ahead of time. If there is conditioning required let me build up that capacity. The invitation to call on God *at the time of need* and trust that God will answer pushes some of us to acknowledge just how much we want to believe that we are the ones who are in control.

To say that God is the one who increases the strength of our soul does not mean that there is NOTHING we can do. It's just important at the outset to understand that anything we do is about being open to receive what God has to give. It's about placing ourselves in the best possible position to take advantage of the power of the wind as the Spirit blows, to use that metaphor from the day of Pentecost.

I want to share just two observations about where we might position ourselves and what we might do in those places to be most open to the strengthening of soul that God's Spirit can provide. I am grateful beyond measure for the liberty the book of Psalms gives to us to lament. We don't have to pretend that life is rosy when we are overcome with grief. We don't have to put on a nice face with God if what our souls require is a season to shake an

angry fist to the heavens. If you were raised in a tradition with strong sense of piety and devotion, then giving yourself permission to lament might take some real effort. But it is worth that effort.

And I am also aware that a time can come when a *singular* focus on that suffering and anger can actually increase the load of our burden. That is when it can be helpful to notice that even the most vitriolic psalms of lament - the ones that shake with outrage – almost always make a shift at some point back round to the offering of praise and thanks to God. Some of you who are on Facebook know that on Wednesday I had the opportunity to drive to Grand Rapids for a meeting and it gave me some space to BE with the grief of this week. Saying goodbye to dear saints who have lived into their 80s like Frank and Elsie is not easy, but it was the particular pain of losing David at the age of 58 in the prime of his life that tipped me toward some of those themes of lament. I saw a CD in the car of Michael Blanchard that I got after he sang here this spring. The first track on the album *Mercy in the Maze* is one he sang in Early Worship when he was here....*Thanks be to God*. I've been listening to it all week.

I was reminded again of how a heart that is practiced in the art of gratitude is so much more resilient than a heart steeped in bitterness. The Psalm opens: "I give you thanks, O God, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise..." Gratitude is one of those places that opens us to the life and movement of God's Spirit. And I've noticed over time that when we are practiced in that art of praise, and once we've given ourselves permission, it makes it possible for us to be more honest about the questions and the doubts and the anger when they come because we know that we are not alone in those questions and we will not be consumed by that anger.

The second observation I want to offer this morning comes from both the psalm and from Gordon's meditation at David's funeral yesterday morning. The end of Psalm 138 says these words: "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfill God's purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands." One of the best things we can do

if we long for God to strengthen our souls is to get back to into life to take up whatever it is that God has given us to do.

Gordon preached an inspiring message yesterday at David Klooster's funeral based on a passage from 2 Corinthians that his family selected. Gordon mentioned that it wasn't a passage he had studied at any length before. I realized as I turned to the texts for today that we were reading that very passage this morning. The reason he had never studied that text in much depth before was because this passage rarely comes up in the lectionary. I'll spare you the details of how the lectionary cycle goes but I will simply say that after 17 years of preaching the lectionary I have never preached these texts before. Gordon focused primarily on chapter five, verse 4: "For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."

He observed that this text does speak to the hope of eternal life with God after this life is over. There is that dimension to this passage. But he noted that what is mortal – and he defined mortality as any aspect of life that is limited, conditional, or broken – that what is mortal gets swallowed not by eternity but by life. And so he walked us through the life of David and observed the places where David's commitment to the purposes of God allowed mortality to be swallowed up by life. As I said, one of the aspects of David and Elsie and Frank that I admired most was precisely their strength of soul, and I suspect it was no coincidence that all of them in their own ways were deeply aware of God's purpose in their life, and they were unswerving in their commitment to fulfill that purpose.

Where do we need to place ourselves and what do we need to do if we long for God to increase the strength of our souls? There is no singular answer, no simple equation, but two things come to mind as a starting place: to immerse yourself in gratitude and to focus your life on God's purposes. If we do those things we may just find ourselves named as a brother or sister or mother of Jesus himself.

"On the day I called, You answered me, You increased the strength of my soul." Thanks be to God!