

“What a Weak!”
Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
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Text: II Corinthians 12

The idea of this sermon is pretty simple: it is to affirm weakness – to affirm weakness as a meaningful part of your identity as a person – mine too – and most particularly as a person of faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, the goal of this sermon is to try to make some sense for us of what Paul writes in I Corinthians 12.2-10 – it’s there that Paul says a lot about weakness: Paul says he will gladly boast about nothing except his weaknesses; Paul offers a word from the Lord that ‘power is made perfect in weakness’; Paul says he is content with weaknesses; Paul says: ‘when I am weak, then I am strong.’ So it’s not that it’s such a profound insight from me to glean from this passage the goal to affirm weakness as an identity embraced in a life of faith – because it’s pretty clear that’s what Paul says. But there are 2 things not so clear to me: what’s not so clear to me is if we believe it when we hear Paul say it – believe that weakness is central to faith, a central identity for us to embrace – do you believe that?! - if you say you do, then I’ll say I doubt it. I’m not sure if we are even in the ballpark of believing it - it seems to me we don’t embrace weakness much at all. And the other thing not so clear to me, is even if we could believe it, what does it mean? – do you know what it means: ‘to boast in weakness’ – ‘power made perfect in weakness’ – ‘when I am weak then I am strong’? If you say you do know what it means, then I’ll say I doubt it! – I think it’s hard to understand – I don’t even know if Paul understands it – but he does believe that it is true – and it is something of that conviction of the truth of it that I am seeking to find with you today.

So, let's try to deal with these things that are not clear to me, and perhaps we can get some clarity together. Can you sense why I am doubtful of us believing in weakness as a good thing? – it seems to me that we are part of a culture that on multiple levels looks to strength as the preferred currency of identity. And I'm going to look at that first on a national level, but I want you to know that I'm going to turn our critical gaze also to the church and to each of us too, so this isn't just picking on the USA. But it sure is easy to see how “strength” is what our narrative is all about as a nation. We're coming off of a whole week of 4th of July celebrations- and I think it would be obnoxious of me to suggest that an Independence Day holiday should be a time to highlight our weaknesses – it is rightly a time to celebrate the freedoms of our nation and that we're proud to be an American – and we set off some fireworks to make sure everyone knows that WE won the war of independence! – celebrating our strength. But that's a narrative that can quickly take some harmful turns. For me as a child, I realize that I was enculturated into a narrative not just that this country was a strong nation, but that the USA was and had to be THE strongest and THE most extraordinary and THE leader and THE authority. And I realized there was a strong current too that would say that to question any of those things was to be disloyal, ungrateful, anti-American. Our national story as an identity of strength runs deep in us.

And what about the church? – well, that's a pretty broad category, the church! – so how about a particular branch such as ours? - Protestant, Reformed, mostly white, established. Well, I don't know if you noticed, but the church likes to talk a lot about how right it is about things! That's a lot of what theology and church activity can tend to be about – how right we are. And our branch of the church has done that with a fair amount of privilege and protection, with resources and advantages – from a position of strength. And actually – just to

take it down to a much more basic, less serious level – what about Hope Church? – well, we love to talk about great we are! – right?! And why shouldn't we?! – we are strong and healthy, doing good things and baptizing babies – let's tell people about that! Strength is good! But I wonder – what might it be for people to be hearing all the time about how strong and right and important we are – I wonder if it ever sounds arrogant, or self-satisfied, or superior – even our dear Hope Church.

And speaking of those babies we are baptizing – do we speak of them as weak? Not so much – they are beautiful and bright and full of promise. These parents and we with them make promises to nurture their strength, to celebrate their gifts. That is how we speak of our children – that is what we want for them: to be strong. With our children it's very personal – would we even consider telling them they are weak? nurturing weakness? It's not our typical conversation, is it?

Strength, is strong! – strength has a grip on our narratives, on our hearts and souls, our fears and hopes. But what if, in order for strength to be truly strong, we have to add weakness – that when we open ourselves to weakness, it changes what strong is about. Let's try that – take these circles of children and church and nation, and work our way back through, to see what weakness would look like – what it would mean – what weakness would do to strength.

For these children that are baptized this day – for our children – what if as parents and as a community of faith, we could practice telling our children that they are dependent and needy! Babies actually are dependent and needy! - but what I really mean is to be a community that speaks of how we need one another, need other's gifts and support– how we need God, God's wisdom and grace – that life is not a do-it-yourself enterprise. And even more, that we can tell our children that they will struggle, and fail and hurt – and that God will be with

them in all of those times. Telling our children they are not self-sufficient and that they will struggle – that is a weakness that will bless them with the strength of wisdom and grace and community.

For the church – what if part of the story we told is how our Christian faith has missed the mark – how church power has been used for harm – we need to find ways to talk about that – need to find ways to listen to other voices of faith and meaning that we have diminished. And what if we're even in a church that we like? – well, here too, it takes intention to make space to speak of our struggles, to give witness to our suffering, to be open with our questions, to be vulnerable with our failings; here it takes effort to focus not on success but on faithfulness – to focus less on strength and more on honesty – less on surviving, and more on giving our lives. Such a narrative of weakness: that is what makes us strong in compassion, conviction and service.

And I think if we nurture our children in that way, and speak of our church in that way – connected to weakness – then we also will hear a calling as Christians to witness in our nation – a witness to weakness. We are a witness to the need to tell our story as a nation honestly, complete with its failings - to not be afraid to hear how we have fallen short. We are a witness to the truth of our inter-dependence, the truth that we're all too weak on our own and that we need one another, that we need community. And what that will be is a witness of weakness that leads to justice – to dare to speak of our weaknesses drives us to the strength of community which nurtures life for all.

I said earlier that I'm not even sure if Paul understood all this weakness that he spoke of, but that he believed it was true. And as I try to ponder this with you today, that seems the best that I can do too. In the midst of all the talk of strength around and within us, I can catch a sense of the deep need for something else – I can feel the Spirit open me to a voice of truth and wisdom that says we

depend utterly on God's grace, utterly on our connection to others, utterly on this good earth God has made; I can feel a sense that I am desperately fragile and imperfect – and I feel what a different kind of story it tells of life to embrace that weakness; and I feel the strength of it – a strength of honesty and grace, of compassion and community, of humility and hope.

There is much we are strong in – thanks be to God. Let us also speak of how great our weakness is – tell it to our babies, and in our church, witness to our nation – so that in such weakness we can feel deep in our souls the strength of belonging to God – the source of a grace that is strong enough to create true life for all. Thanks be to God. AMEN.