



My Power Is Made Perfect In Weakness

The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost - July 5, 2009

"My Power Is Made Perfect In Weakness"

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The rejection of Jesus by the Galileans in the first part of today's Gospel foreshadows Jesus' rejection by all of Israel, culminating in the cross. "He came unto his own, and his own received him not."

Contrary to his successes in the Gospel stories of the last few Sundays, i.e. calming the storm and raising the daughter of Jairus back to life, Jesus experienced failure at his return to Nazareth. His teaching was unpersuasive and his miracles limited. The people who had watched him grow up, refused to believe in him, "and he could do no mighty work there." He could do nothing except "marvel [at] their unbelief" (One translation has it "[was] distressed [by]") and move on to teach in the neighboring villages.

This story should not surprise us since ultimately Jesus' three short years of public ministry were terminated by the scandalous failure of the cross. But somehow it does catch us off guard. We are not used to thinking of Jesus as inadequate to the task. After all he is our ultimate hero, and as such, we assume that, unlike us, he always succeeded at whatever he undertook. Was he not powerful, competent, in charge of whatever happened, invulnerable, uncomplaining, and accorded unwavering loyalty, like all good heroes?

No. Jesus was a profoundly different hero. He did fail, as we heard in today's Gospel. He could not "get through" to many who were closest to him. He was ultimately betrayed by one of his hand-picked followers and abandoned by the rest of them.

Such rejection stung him to the core. He wept over Jerusalem's intransigence and was deeply disappointed at his friends' inattentiveness at Gethsemane on his last night when he needed them most.

He recoiled from the death that faced him. The Letter to the Hebrews says "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death" (5:7). Luke tells us that he begged his Father for an escape from this death, and that "his sweat became like great drops of blood, falling down upon the ground" (Lk 22:44). Eventually he came to terms with his death, but even then he faced it in silence and isolation.

In short, Jesus was much more vulnerable, more genuinely human, more profoundly weak, than our usual impression of him allows. The words addressed to Paul in today's Epistle, were primarily those of the Father to Jesus, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Jesus was content with weakness and vulnerability and failure that the power of God might rest upon him. His life proclaimed, in the words of Paul, "When I am weak, then I am strong."

How different our lives would be if we could truly embrace that truth! How much more could God's power work in us if we could accept our weakness!

As individuals we would not spend so much time and energy proving ourselves to other people. We would not neglect to volunteer for needed tasks because of fear that we are unqualified. We would not always choose the "safe" path, but trust more in God. We would give away more of our money.

We would be more open with ourselves and others about our struggles and our doubts and our failures. We would not demand so much from other people, although we would risk looking for and hoping for more. We would not waste so much time and energy regretting our past, being anxious about the present and worrying about our future. Knowing our deep need for grace, we would pray constantly and insistently and humbly but expectantly for God's strength.

As a parish we would work harder to get below mere friendliness to find and to give the love and support that is truly to characterize us as Christians. We would not worry about our standing in the community, but only how we might better serve the community. We would not be afraid to take risks or to extend ourselves for the sake of God's kingdom. We would not worry too much about where the resources are to come from to do what God asks us to do.

As a national church, entering into General Convention this week, we would not be preoccupied by the difficulties we face. We would not be too anxious about the outcome of various legal proceedings. We would be sure that conflicts and honest disagreement will always be with us, but we would also be confident that God's strength and God's wisdom will ultimately prevail.

As a nation, celebrating our national holiday, we would be less sure that God is always on our side. We would be less quick to commit our military might and more ready to admit our past mistakes. We would be less obsessed with the security of our money and more concerned with those shackled by poverty and who have no real voice in our political process.

Does all that, and more that you could supply, seem impossible? It is, of course, on our own strength. But Jesus is not only our model, but more importantly our Savior and the One who sends us the Spirit. We do not save ourselves, but Jesus redeems us in our weakness and fills us with the Spirit, who is at work within us. God's words to Paul are also addressed to us as individuals, as a parish, as the Church trying to continue on earth the work Jesus began in the midst of inadequacy and failure, as a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

II Cor. 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-6