

Sermon, *God's Power Perfected in Weakness*
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels by the Sea, 7.7.24

Elijah was at a youth group event where someone brought in a box of Costco chocolate cookies. They are the cookies that are in that clam shell box that opens like a treasure chest. The cookies are lined up like an old-time jukebox would line up records. I don't know how Costco does it, but they are able to make these large cookies, in mass, but they are just slightly undercooked so they fall apart a little bit when you pick them up. That's how I like my cookies – to fall apart a little bit because that means all the calories fall out too, right; isn't that how it works? Anyway, someone brought these cookies, presumably for the kids, so I watched to see if there would be any left for the adults. I was amazed that kids could walk by and not take one. For me, I have difficulty stopping at eating just one. Part of me would say to just have that box for dinner. I have an easier time eating none than eating just one.

Costco also sells a cheesecake. It's almost the size of a manhole cover. I can have a small sliver of a slice and be just fine. Others, however, would say to themselves that three slices would be their dinner. It's funny how food works that way.

I have told my leadership team this: if you are looking for a gift for your Rector, just think of either brownies or bourbon. Why those two things? I like them both, a lot, yet like cheesecake a little goes a long way. Take bourbon for instance, after I've completed a project, I like to sit down with equal parts ice and about an inch of bourbon in a small tumbler. I sip it and relax. It's great. And, when I have finished the glass, I can put the cork in the bottle and set it on the shelf for another day. Bourbon is patient; it'll wait for me. The same with brownies. I really like brownies; but I can eat one or two squares and then wrap up the container and put it in the fridge for another day. It's a great treat.

Don't give me a gift of a two-liter bottle of Coke Zero or a bag of chili-cheese Fritos. ... unless you want to see me finish the bottle or the bag. When I buy, on great occasion, chili-cheese Fritos, I buy the smallest bag possible because I know I'll want to finish it. Fig Newtons are the same way with me. Forget the serving size of three newtons; no, for me, the serving size is the entire sleeve!

Each of us have different strengths and weaknesses. When it comes to food, well, you've seen where I have weaknesses; particularly with Coke Zero and Fritos. I bring up strengths and weaknesses because Paul, the author of the Second Letter to the Corinthians, wrote that when he is weak, God is strong and that he'll boast of his weaknesses so that God in him will be strong.

When I think of weaknesses, it reminds me of the often-used interview question, describe your weaknesses. When I have been the interviewer, I have heard this: my weakness is that I care too much. Another is this: I get really passionate about what I am doing and forget everything else, that's my weakness. I'd like to say, "No, that's not a weakness but a passion." But, nevertheless, it is difficult for us to talk about our weaknesses. We like strengths. But the question is, when we go from strength to strength, where does that leave room for God? Paul answers with this simple phrase: when I am weak, God (I AM) is strong.

Paul had a lot of strengths. The world has never seen a better preacher, writer or church planter. He had the gift of healing. There was a young man who fell out of a window and died on the street. Paul laid hands on him and healed him. Paul has the gift of visions too, of revelations. Yet, with all his strengths, he wrote, “when I am weak then I am strong.”

But that’s not the American way. It’s not the North American way. It’s probably not even the western European way. We like to boast of our strengths, to rely on them, and to go from strength to strength. We diminish our weaknesses. We hide them. There were a good number of business self-help books written in the 1990s that talk about weaknesses but in the sense that we can overcome them and make them strengths and therefore we will be richer. (Okay, probably not richer but at least better in business). Yet, that is not Paul’s approach – when I am weak then I am strong. He goes a step further – I will boast about my weaknesses so that God’s strength will show through. That must be a spiritual practice because it’s not a normal way for us to present ourselves. Let me ask you a question: what do you consider a weakness in yourself? Have you seen how God works through that weakness? Let’s take a closer look at the spiritual practice of identifying where we are weak and let’s see how God is made strong in our weaknesses.

To begin with, this section is from the 12th chapter of the 2nd letter to the Corinthians. We have spent all summer reading from 2nd Corinthians and this is our last pericope from that excellent tome. If you’ve been reading the introductions I included before more of the readings, Paul is responding to complaints he has received from a number of different aspects – he preaches too much about himself, he’s too ephemeral, he’s too down-to-earth, etc, etc. I am glad that he heard the complaints and that he himself wrote back to them. I am a part of a group of scholars that believes 2nd Corinthians was a collection of a number of letters to the community that Paul founded. Somewhere along the line, the collection of responses were knit together in what is now called 2nd Corinthians. This chapter looks as if it can stand on its own. Paul writes about someone he knows who went up into heaven and saw things there that surpass language. Most theologians believe Paul is referring to himself but chooses to refer to himself in this way. Again, he can boast about how great he is, but, he chooses to live and write this way which he believes lifts up God instead of himself.

One of the times Paul may have seen heaven is when he was stoned to death in Lystra. His body was dragged outside of the city limits. From there, he was reanimated – came back to life – and continued his ministry. But, the damage to his body had been done. Non-biblical accounts of Paul’s looks include what appears to be a broken nose and a limp. In today’s passage, Paul writes about a “thorn of the flesh” that was placed in him. Three times he appealed to God to have it removed but God said, “My grace is sufficient for you because (my) strength is made perfect in weakness.” I’ve said before that when God says “no” it is louder than when God says “yes”. In this case, God said no. And, at the same time, God’s grace is sufficient.

Paul had the gift of healing. Yet, when appealing to God for personal healing, the answer was no. I think the thorn in the flesh was a physical ailment. Some theologians suggest it was an allegory for something else, like an addiction. But, I think it was a pain in his side. In particular, his gait was most likely affected by the stoning he received in Lystra. Paul wanted to travel – he wanted to go to Spain and even in this letter he wanted to travel back to the city of Corinth to visit. But, he couldn’t travel like he wanted to. My suggestion is that he couldn’t travel because of this

thorn in the flesh. Nevertheless, God said that grace is sufficient and his power is made perfect in weakness. I read that in this way: if Paul was healed, he would have simply traveled back to Corinth and told his people what he was thinking which would have been lost to time. Since he could not travel, however, he wrote to them. And, because he wrote, we now have those letters! That's God's grace in action.

Along those same lines, Paul raised up many leaders to go do the work he himself could not physically do. We know about Timothy, Titus, Barnabus, and Pheobe as well as Priscilla and Aquila. Another one of Paul's coworkers was someone named John Mark who many believe is the author of the Gospel of Mark. There are many more coworkers who we do not know their names. All these folks were raised up because of Paul's weakness. And thanks be to God they were (and thanks for Paul's weakness too that led to it happening).

My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.

Let's talk for a minute about the word perfect. As I have mentioned before (and will mention again), "perfect" is not a perfect translation of the Greek word Paul used. The word Paul wrote is *teleatai* which is "to complete" or "to finish" or "to add something that makes it completed or finished." As you can see, there is no direct equivalent in English. The way I like to read *teleatai* has to do with finishing a marathon. It's not necessarily about who finishes first but rather an individual achievement to actually finish the race. Imagine a runner who with one hundred feet left to go starts to wobble and almost fall down. Another runner puts his arm around the runner and helps him across the finish line. The crowd sees it and cheers, "Hurray!" That's how I read *teleatai*. *My power is teleatai in weakness. My power is "Hurray" in weakness.* God's strength is shown in the way that we help one another. The way that Timothy, Pheobe, Barnabus, Priscilla and John Mark helped cross the finish line – that's God's strength manifested in weakness.

I have a friend, John Holtzermann, who helped me this weekend with a project. Many of you would recognize John because during our busy season he sits right in the front row. He is a handyman. I called him and asked a question my dad would ask someone he was seeking advice from, "What wisdom would you have liked to know before you began a particular project?" In this case, the replacement of a toilet. John told me all the stuff he wished he knew before he did the job. My weakness is that I had never replaced a toilet. God's strength is shown in how John helped me learn how to do it. And then I passed that wisdom to Elijah who helped me with the entire project. That's God's power being made known to us.

I had mentioned earlier that some theologians thought Paul's "thorn in the side" was an allegory of something else, like addiction. I know some folks who are alcoholics. One of them had the gift of laying on of hands and healing people. He himself prayed to God to heal him from his addiction. But, God's grace is sufficient and God's power is completed and finished in weakness. My friend has helped many people through alcoholism because he has to work through it every day. He is a mentor to others and again has helped many people. If God had "healed" him of his addiction, he would have helped others finish their own race. That's God's grace and that is God's power working in and through weakness.

It is a strength that I can sip some bourbon, put a cork in the bottle, and wait for another project to finish. The same with brownies. Yet I know others who do not have that strength and find God's power manifesting when they admit their weakness. Likewise, God's strength is shown in me when I avoid Coke Zero. But I have many more weaknesses. Yet, God's strength is finishing in each one that I identify and turn over to God. As we age, there are things that we used to be able to do that we can no longer accomplish on our own. The spiritual side of ageing is inviting others to help us where we are weak. And, when we invite them to help, God's power is made "*Hurray*" in it. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.