

## THE STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

Sermon preached by the Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

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Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

On a daily basis I spend a good portion of my time sending and answering emails. It's quick and efficient, and I usually get twice as much done in half the time. I schedule meetings, respond to queries about a whole range of pastoral issues, plan programs, arrange worship services, and, of course, send the newest pictures of my daughter to just about everyone. And my email program has that feature where a new message flashes on my screen immediately, even if I'm working in a different program. I can't resist opening the message as soon as it pops up. It's a bad habit, and sometimes, by the end of the day, I realize that all I've done is send and answer emails. Sure, I've crossed off everything off my to-do list, but something is lost. We all know this. Email is convenient, but its convenience comes at a price.

In a recent article in Christian Century magazine, a pastor writes about net-iquette, or the etiquette of email. She freely admits how email has simplified her life and made her days more productive, but she wonders at what cost. Surely, she could make a phone call, or, better yet, have a face-to-face meeting- the way things were done in the olden days, ten or fifteen years ago, but it would take so much longer and give rise to a whole host of time-consuming complications. So she conducts her business primarily on-line, administrative, programmatic and pastoral. She tries to seek a balance, while acknowledging that technology is both blessing and curse. And she wonders: Have we become lazy in our communications with one another? Are we hiding behind our computer screens and Blackberries and iPhones, to avoid the messiness and complications of real life encounters?

For the Apostle Paul, letter-writing was the only alternative to being present with the communities he was serving- his only means of maintaining contact, resolving disputes and encouraging the faith of these congregations. Paul was always on the road, traveling from as far east as Jerusalem, and as far west as Rome, with significant time spent in present-day Turkey and Greece. The letters he did write took time to reach their desired address. There was no established postal system, no easy access to parchment, and very few who could even read what was written. But Paul persisted, and thank goodness for it, because much of what we understand about the early Christian community and life in the generations after Jesus' death and resurrection, are preserved in these letter fragments.

One disadvantage of the written word- whether Scripture or email - is the difficulty of determining the sentiment of the author. You know those emails you get, and you can't figure out if the writer is being snide or sincere? In the same way, for those of us reading Paul's letters today, and even the intended readers, we have to make inferences about his meaning, especially in tricky texts like the one Barbara read this morning. It's hard to imagine that any Scripture would harbor sarcasm, or frustration, within its text, but that is likely the case with Paul in the latter half of 2 Corinthians. Paul, out of necessity and not convenience, conducts a relationship

with a congregation in turmoil, addressing conflict and challenging accusations by letter. He does not hide behind the parchment, but engages a community with whom he cannot engage in person.

Paul had a complicated relationship with the church in Corinth. The city of Corinth, in what is now Greece, was known as “Sin City,” the Las Vegas of the ancient world. It was a city with a superficial cultural life, a place where sailors stopped over for a little entertainment. It was a city of great wealth, as well as great poverty. The congregation of the Corinthian church reflected the diverse socioeconomic and religious makeup of the city, including its ‘steep social pyramid.’ The church was no stranger to conflict, and Paul’s relationship to them, as attested through his extant letters, was likewise conflicted. Paul loved the Corinthian church fiercely, but over time, tensions emerged and dissenters began making allegations against Paul.

The portion of 2 Corinthians that we heard today is not Paul’s second letter to the church as we might understandably presume. Chapters 10-13 are not even from the same letter represented in chapters 1-9. In this latter and later letter (say that three times fast), Paul is responding to new critics of his leadership, outsiders and show-offs, who challenge his authority. Frustrated, hurt, and probably angry, Paul engages these ‘super-apostles’, as he calls them sarcastically, and reluctantly engages them on their level. For Paul, the marks of a true apostle are evident in the day-to-day living out of the gospel, not in fancy revelations and personal religious experiences, as these critics seem to be claiming. But these super-apostles bait him, and his response is what we hear at the beginning of this passage. Rather than proclaim outright that he received special revelations from God, he uses third-person language. It is both rhetorical trick and jibe. Paul beats the super-apostles at their own game, getting caught up in the self-aggrandizing that is contrary to his understanding of his Christian identity.

But Paul doesn’t stop there, verbally jousting with those who would seek to discredit his leadership. Paul moves past the story of this ‘person,’ himself thinly disguised, who is caught up in Paradise and privy to divine messages that cannot be repeated, and he addresses the congregation, and his critics, with the heart of his message- real power, and thus real authority, rests in God alone and manifests in human weakness. And so Paul boasts of his weakness, thereby boasting of God’s strength, using the ‘thorn in his flesh’ as illustration.

Many have tried, but none have succeeded, in determining what the thorn was to which Paul refers. It might have been a psychological illness, or a chronic, physical ailment, like malaria, or migraines, or eye problems. It has also been suggested that the thorn was an individual with whom Paul was in great conflict. Whatever it was, that thorn was exceedingly troublesome to Paul, a man who, by his own admission, had already survived three floggings, a stoning, three shipwrecks, bandits, imprisonment, and hunger, just for starters. And so taxing was this thorn to Paul that he prayed to God three times that God would remove it. For one who boasts of weakness, for one who survived all sorts of physical danger, for one who claims the strength of God resides in human weakness, this must have been a mighty thorn, indeed, to provoke such a plea from Paul, the true super-apostle. It is a humbling picture.

Who among us doesn’t have at least one thorn in our flesh? There are times when I feel like my skin is covered in thorns of varying sizes and pointy-ness, pricking the flesh and piercing

the skin, but not in the devil-may-care way that some sleep on beds of nails or hang from hooks in their flesh. Maybe some or most of my own thorns are self-inflicted, but all our thorns, as diverse and unique as snowflakes, are real and they hurt. And none of us, not even Paul, can escape their torment.

There is one among us whose thorn has grown larger in recent months, and that is Roxroy Salmon. Carrying a nonviolent conviction from twenty years ago, for which he served no prison time; Roxroy is facing imminent deportation, due to the 1996 changes in immigration law. Despite his 30+ years in this country, despite the citizenship of his wife, mother, children and grandchild, despite the fact that he is the caretaker of his family, despite the support of our church and the New York Sanctuary Coalition, and Families for Freedom, and various politicians, Roxroy may be detained at his hearing on Tuesday and returned to Jamaica, separated irrevocably from his family. That is a thorn in the flesh, if I've ever seen one.

There is among us a family with a sick child, facing another round of tests and painful treatment. Illness has enveloped the family for years now, and its grip is growing tighter with each passing day, overwhelming every aspect of their life. It is a thorn in the flesh almost too painful to speak of.

Who among us doesn't have at least one thorn in the flesh? And who among us hasn't cried out, like Paul, appealing to God that the thorn leave us? The answer that Paul received, the answer that we may or may not hear when we make our prayers, is this: "My grace is sufficient for you." We might have preferred that God just pluck that thorn out of our flesh, kiss the boo-boo, apply a little Neosporin to prevent infection, and cover it with a Mickey Mouse Band-Aid! And, then, with a little pat on the knee and a smile, say, "All better".

But Paul got no pat on the knee, no Band-Aid, no Neosporin, no kissing of the boo-boo. When the Lord finally responded to Paul's petitions for relief, Paul received not a cure, but an oracle. What the oracle provides is not a cure, but a promise that God's power will sustain Paul, and likewise us, in the midst of our weakness and misery. God's grace will suffice. God promises more than plucking the thorn and healing the wound. God promises limitless love and grace and power to overcome all of our weaknesses, our limitations, our thorns. God promises us that that boundless grace will conquer every thorn, even death, as God's grace and power conquered death in Jesus Christ.

For Paul, this is a real reason for boasting. For Paul, God's strength and love manifest most strongly in our human weakness. Weakness is a tricky concept for us workhorse Calvinists and bootstrap Americans. We think we can accomplish anything with enough blood, sweat and tears. We are incorrigibly self-sufficient. Yet these pesky thorns continue to appear, and we realize that we cannot take care of them all by ourselves. We cannot solve all our own problems and cure every disease and eliminate all injustice, all by ourselves. Weakness is, to a certain extent, the human predicament. Weakness is the reality of not being able to control every contingency. But weakness can, when theologically understood, open up space inside us to allow God's grace to enter in. There is no room for God in the self-contained, self-sufficient person.

Choosing to follow in Paul's footsteps and boast of our weakness means accepting our experiences of limitation and trusting that God's power is sufficient to conquer all that would work against us. It means believing that, "Nothing, no matter how severe, can happen for which God does not also provide a way out, because God's grace will always prevail over sin and death." Paul understood this finally, though don't forget that he petitioned God three times before he heard God's message clearly. (Even the best among us sometimes need a little extra time to get what God has in mind for us...) And Paul's eventual response to God was, "So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." He found the strength in weakness. Paul recognized that our power and strength come in the letting go, the emptying out, the stripping down, the sloughing off, to make room for God in Christ to 'take up residence' within us.

Our thorns will continue to cause pain, even deep anguish, but hopefully our prayers will change. In addition to praying for God to remove our thorns and heal our wounds, we might also pray for God's grace to dwell within us, filling us up with the love and power that conquers sin and death. That grace which is sufficient to our insufficiency, that grace which is limitless to our limitation, that grace which is strength to our weakness, that grace which is life to our death- that grace will overcome us, and we will boast of it to all who will listen.

It is my hope that Roxroy's hearing on July 7th will not result in immediate detention. The best case scenario will allow Roxroy to remain in this country indefinitely, but with no hope for citizenship unless the laws change. So we pray for the best case scenario, and we also pray for God's power to fill up and dwell within those of us who will stand by Roxroy on Tuesday morning. And we pray that for Roxroy and his family, the sufficiency of God's grace will be evident.

It is my hope that the child battling relentless illness will recover to full health. So we pray that the new treatment is successful, and we pray also for God's strength to fill up and dwell within her and her family, overcoming the grief that pain has wrought. And we pray that for this family, the boundless love of God will be present among them through everything.

Paul prayed in such a way for the church in Corinth, that they might realize God's grace was sufficient for them, even in the midst of their turmoil, even as they questioned his leadership among them. The fact that he wrote such a letter at all, in the midst of his own physical and emotional pain, reveals his hopes for the members of that church to open their hearts, to claim their weakness and to make a place for Christ to dwell within them. May it be so for us.