

July 4, 2021. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray,

Open us to your Word and your way, Holy God. Inspire us with your presence. Quiet our distracted minds and help us to focus on the message you intend for us today. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from 2nd Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 2 through 10.

Listen now for the word of the Lord.

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. 3 And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — 4 was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. 5 On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. 6 But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, 7 even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. 8 Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9 but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power[c] is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. “For whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”weak.

What is weakness?

What does it mean to be weak?

If you really think about it - there doesn't seem to be a straight forward answer.

For instance - the Merriam Webster dictionary has no less than TEN different definitions for the word weak. And some of those definitions even have multiple sub-definitions. All of these definitions range from descriptions such as 'lacking strength,' to not able to function properly, to not having or exerting authority.

Weak, weakness, it means so many things in so many different settings.

Weak can be applied to or describe our body, our minds, our emotions, - really just every part of our world and culture. And because of that, it carries so much weight, so much stigma, so much deception, so much shame.

So when Paul says, 'for whenever I am weak, then I am strong', what does he mean?

What weakness, what definition of weak does he mean?

Paul is such a dynamic and vibrant writer, but in order to grasp his writing style, and thus place yourself in this scripture, you really have to be in the context in which he's writing.

Second Corinthians, we know, is a letter. It was a letter written to a specific group of people, in a specific time, in a specific place, and to address a specific situation.

Knowing these details, this letter's place in history, helps paint for us a better picture of the real life that was going on behind these words.

It makes it easier to find the connection to our lives today, to truly appreciate why this letter - like all Paul's letters - have been so influential and important to so many people for thousands of years - not just the Corinthians.

You see, Paul has a long history with the Corinthians. He started the church in Corinth. As we know, this is second Corinthians, meaning this is the second letter of Paul's to the church in Corinth that was canonized into scripture and thus part of the Bible.

But in first Corinthians, Paul mentions another letter he sent to them before our first Corinthians - so we know there was a lot of correspondence between the two after Paul started the church and then moved on to the next stage of his missionary journey. And in this letter, Paul is hurt.

Rival missionaries have come to Corinth preach against Paul, and it seems they are starting to sway the Corinthians away from him.

In the text of the letter directly preceding our scripture for today Paul mockingly calls those rival missionaries 'Super Apostles' and admonishes them for boasting about their strength and power.

So Paul, in turn, begins to boast about his weakness. and by doing this - he is both ironically acting like these super-apostles to criticize their foolishness, but also distancing himself from them.

He shows the Corinthians that his difference from those super-apostles is grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

While they boast about power, he boasts about weakness - for in his weaknesses dwells the power of Christ.

But again, what does he mean by weakness? *physical, mental, spiritual - he never says.*

The greek word for weak sheds more light for us. The root of the greek word for weak indicates a holding together or cohesion," specifically referring to bodies (not just human bodies - any bodies). So to be strong, not weak "means to be self-contained and self-identical, even as the world is falling apart around you."

With that root, the greek word for weak, means coming undone. Undoing.

On this significance, David Fredrickson writes, "So when Paul confesses in 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 5 that he only boasts in his weakness, he says what must have been

puzzling to his readers and utterly unintelligible to the super-apostles had they ever gotten their hands on this text. He boasts in his coming undone.” To come undone. To break apart piece by piece. That’s where Paul says Christ power is made perfect in us.

It seems strange and foreign to us, just like Paul’s readers - that in coming undone Christ dwells within us - that it is there that his power is made perfect.

But for Christ - his undoing was shown before the world. Piece by piece he came apart on that cross - until the ultimate undoing - death.

But it is precisely this coming undone that Christ’s power is perfected, thus redefining both power and weakness.

For the climax of his weakest moment, the crucifixion, made possible, created space for his greatest glory - resurrection.

There is a type of Japanese art called kintsugi, where broken pieces of pottery are mended or joined back together with gold or silver lacquer.

The word kintsugi is actually two Japanese words - kin, which means golden, and tsugi, which means joinery or repair. So literally kintsugi is - golden joinery.

Our traditions would tell us to throw away a piece of pottery after it is broken - for what use is there for broken pottery.

But kintsugi comes from a philosophy of embracing the flawed or imperfect.

It believes the pottery, with its golden veins joining the piece back together, is more beautiful for having been broken.

And the finished product is stunning - it is both the same piece, but transformed - with beautiful gold veins breathing new life in the piece.

A piece where the brokenness is just an event in its life, rather than the end. A transformation that is only possible because it broke. Because it came undone.

Perhaps the power of Christ works in the same way. That when we come undone - those cracks and pieces create space where Christ can dwell within us and join us back together with gold. With grace and love.

Now this does **not** mean we must break - we must come undone - that we must suffer - for Christ to dwell with us.

But in the ways that life can take its toll, and external pressures and expectations and our insecurities - can sometimes lead to coming undone to weakness, Pauls’ words to the Corinthians assure us that Christ is with us in these moments. That even these moments Christ works through us, piecing us back together with gold.

And in doing so, he both affirms who we are - God’s beloved - and transforms us to new life and meaning here on earth rooted in Christ - rooted in the gold that makes us whole once again.

The gold that allows coming undone not to be the end - but just one step on a longer journey. The gold shows resurrection, **just as the holes in the risen Christ's hand.**

Just as Christ resides in our weaknesses as individuals, so too he resides in our weaknesses, in our coming undone as a community.

It's a reality that the mainline protestant churches in America are shrinking. The PUCSA itself as a denomination is getting older and smaller. And as we grasp outward for ways to continue to grow and stay relevant to continue to keep up the numbers - what would it mean if we instead looked inward, we looked for Christ in our weaknesses?

What would the church look like if we learned from Paul - we boasted about our weaknesses to all the 'super apostles' who boast their strength and power.

We boast about the ways we're coming undone and breaking into little pieces - but in doing so - we create space for christ to dwell within us. To fill those broken places and fuse us back together transformed for new life - rooted in Christ. Rooted in those gold veins.

Weakness is part of of life. It always has been - and it always will be.

We need not be afraid.

For in all the ways we try to break apart and define exactly what weakness is and all the ways it shapes history and society and culture, perhaps the only definition of weakness we need is Christ. For in his weakest moment on that cross, as they watched him come undone - there was his strength.

A dead God. A weak God. A risen God

A risen god who dwells within you - within me - within us. And for that - thanks be to God. Amen.