

sermon-7/5/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Redefining Power”
2 Cor. 12: 2-10
By Jim Patten

This passage in Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth shows us Paul at his best. Unfortunately, at first glance, it also shows him at his most annoying! There are just so many perplexing parts to this passage. There are also some ideas that seem downright troubling. This is especially true if we read this section of his letter out of context.

What in the world does Paul mean by the “third heaven?” I had no idea heaven was a multi-story dwelling. Why does he say he does not want to boast, except in his weakness, and then he goes ahead and boasts anyway? Scholars tell us Paul was referring to himself when he talks about that person caught up in the third heaven.

Then there is the whole “thorn in the flesh” part of this passage. The Greek word Paul uses here can be translated “sharpened stick.” This is referring to a stick used in torture! How can a sharpened stick be a gift, presumably from God, as well as a messenger of Satan?

People have speculated as to what Paul is referring to when he mentions this thorn in the flesh. No one has come up with a definitive suggestion. Some have said it was an illness or even a speech impediment. Two respected commentators I read actually said Paul was referring to his marriage! I had never heard that Paul might have been married. While many who are married would readily admit that marriage keeps one humble, few would want to call their spouse a messenger from Satan!

Regardless of what Paul is referring to when he talks about this thorn in the flesh, many of us are troubled by the notion that God does not want him, or us, for that matter, to be too elated. Does God really send us some torturous problem so we won’t be too happy? What is too happy anyway? Many in our day are not comfortable when they are happy. They always seem to have that nagging suspicion that some other shoe will drop and mock their happiness. The notion of God giving Paul this thorn can be so easily misused.

So, what are we to make of this text? Seeing it in context is very helpful. Paul was answering what he called, “super-apostles” who were saying very negative things about him. They said they had much greater experience of things of the Spirit than did Paul. They were urging the church in Corinth to follow their advice and ignore Paul.

Paul felt the need to defend himself against these insults. At the same time he did not want to get into a bragging contest with them. He felt foolish getting into that kind of competition. Still, somewhat tongue in cheek, he ends up doing it anyway. But then he feels bad.

Look at what he says in verse eleven, the verse right after our passage. “I have been a fool! You forced me to it. Indeed you should have been the ones commending me, for I

am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing.” Reading between the lines we can feel Paul’s defensiveness and vulnerability.

Given all that, what can we glean from this passage? Certainly Paul is redefining power in a radical and sweeping way. He writes that God said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” It is when we are “weak”, in other words, that God can use us.

Certainly Jesus on the cross was the ultimate example of that. In his seeming defeat when he was condemned to death, God defeated the power of death and all that holds humanity in bondage. Some in Jesus’ day tried to defeat Rome by force. They trusted power over weakness. They failed. But, God used Jesus’ self-giving love to finally defeat death and the powers of injustice.

When God uses our weakness, we cannot be fooled into thinking it is our power and effort that will produce good results. It is clear any power unleashed for good is from God. It is not our power that is the truly liberating force. When we trust our own power, we forget that power corrupts. Power can distort reality.

This is tough because none of us likes to show weakness, none of us likes to see ourselves in an inferior position when we compare ourselves to others. Most of us want to be seen as powerful, or at least better than the average. I read about a poll that was done asking men about their athletic ability. 90% of those polled said they were above average athletically! That doesn’t leave many to fill the average or below average role! Talk about a distorted self-image.

Certainly we have gotten into trouble as a nation when we have acted as if our power is what keeps us safe. We have ended up playing a macho role, going it alone, arrogantly refusing to speak to those who threaten us, not admitting to mistakes, giving up on diplomacy far too quickly.

As we celebrate the 4th of July this weekend we need to ponder what it would mean for our country to express power in weakness. What would that look like? Is that even appropriate for a country to attempt? Would that make us too vulnerable? Would an elected official ever be re-elected if they tried that?

Before we close we need to revisit the thorn in the flesh issue. As one commentator notes, Paul only saw this thorn as a good thing in retrospect. Initially he saw it as something he did not want to have. He prayed three times for God to take it away. He would not ask God to take away a gift if he thought that gift was making him a better person.

But Paul also knew he could be prideful. It does not take a very careful reading of Paul’s letters in the New Testament to see that pride at work. Sometimes he comes off as very arrogant. Paul was also able to see, in retrospect, that this thorn in the flesh kept him from boasting. It kept him grounded, as it were. One scholar said it kept him in touch

with his finitude and limits. That is absolutely crucial for anyone in a leadership position, especially in the Church.

Another thought on this came to me from New Testament scholar Walter Wink. He writes, “God’s coming into our lives doesn’t always make us whole. But it does make us more real.”

That is an intriguing notion. We all long for wholeness. God’s presence in our lives certainly contributes to that wholeness. But sometimes there are other realities that might be just as useful to our lives and our effectiveness as leaders. I know in my own life it was those mentors who were real human beings, authentic, yet wounded, that have earned my trust. I have grown and learned more from them than those who seem to have their lives all together.

This passage in 2 Corinthians is very helpful as we reevaluate what makes us strong, and what makes us useful as disciples of Christ. The world seems to value strength. Sometimes that causes us to underemphasize more important traits. I am reminded of what Anne Lamott said in her wonderful book, *Traveling Mercies* (p. 103).

“It’s funny. I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But then when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools—friendship, prayer, conscience, honesty—and said, Do the best you can with these, they will have to do. And mostly, against all odds, they’re enough.”

It is those seemingly weaker gifts where the power of God can be expressed through us. For as God said to Paul, and continues to say to us, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Amen