

INI

2 Corinthians 11,19-12,10

Sexagesima Sunday — 31 January 2016

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the first lesson from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, which was read earlier; Paul writes:

Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: We've all heard of the expression "boasting rights." It usually refers to a situation where someone has the best or the biggest of something and that gives the person the right to boast.

Sometimes we can see this in fishing, and the boasting always is biggest with the proverbial "one that got away." But now it's presidential primary season, and the politicians have no trouble on the one hand inflating anything and everything they've done in whatever capacity they've held public office, and on the other hands their opponents have no problem in popping their inflated egos. One hardly need give examples – and if I gave examples, I might be accused of favoring one candidate over another. I am reminded of Will Roger's observation – I think it is attributable to him and I hope it isn't too cynical. How can you tell when a politician is lying? His lips are

moving.

It would seem that there are boasting rights in spiritual matters, or church and ministry, as well. This matter of boasting rights was something with which Paul had to contend. But as we shall see, Paul put a different interpretation on boasting than did his opponents; and as always with Paul, he shifts attention away from himself and puts the attention where it belongs, on Christ.

This brings us to the theme of today's sermon, “**Finding Strength In Weakness.**” I'll develop this in three points:

- 1) Boasting Rights;**
- 2) A Thorny Situation;** and,
- 3) Real Strength.**

1) Boasting Rights. In spiritual matters, boasting rights have not changed much over the centuries. And it seems that the false emphasis on personal testimony as the touchstone of spiritual authority has not changed much either.

Paul had founded the Christian congregation at Corinth at the end of his second missionary journey. He could not stay, but had built a good foundation. Soon, however, others came to Corinth, and, as the saying goes, “there was trouble in river city.” New people came and preached a new and different Christ. These people were of a Jewish background, but rather than call the Corinthians back to observing the Jewish laws, they were telling them about the freedom they had in Christ. They were telling them that since Christ forgave everything they had the perfect freedom to act in whatever manner they wanted.

Not only could the Corinthians forget about any Old Testament dietary regulations, they could also forget about such laws as regarding sexual purity. In a phrase, anything goes.

They preached a freedom to be self-indulgent while Paul preached about a freedom to serve. These people had their own personal testimony, their own revelations. They seemed to preach Christ, but their source of authority was themselves. Furthermore, in response to Paul, they seemed to indicate how much better they were than he was – they told people to look at them, and they seemed to be more impressive physically, they spoke better, and they had their own revelations and visions.

Paul met this threat head-on. He said that this competition for boasting rights was foolishness. But if it were foolishness, then he, Paul, was willing to play the fool. But rather than boast in his strength, Paul trotted out a list of his afflictions – beatings, shipwrecks, stonings, hunger and thirst, and the like.

Now in the human mind nothing succeeds like success. Bigger is better. Strength is power. Paul's opponents seemingly pointed to their physical and spiritual prowess. They had not suffered hardships or reversals. They were vigorous. And they had plenty of personal testimony to prove it. But in all of their personal testimony, as well as everything else, they were pointing to themselves – a “me, me, me” kind of theology.

What should Paul speak about? He spoke about a:

2) A Thorny Situation. Paul attacked this indulgent “me-centered” kind of talk, and in one of the few personal references in any of his thirteen letters, speaks of the fact that while he too had a very special revelation, God gave him a thorn in the flesh in order that he might be humbled and not revel in this special gift. Paul did not want to speak about himself, but when special, extraordinary circumstances forced him to, he did.

First, what was this “thorn in the flesh”? Well, in a phrase, no one knows. Paul was never more specific than this. There has been much

speculation over the centuries. People have thought it was everything from acute eye problems, a recurring kind of malaria (which was prevalent in the Mediterranean world), special temptations, a pain in the head, perhaps migraine headaches. But in the end, we have to say, no one knows.

Second, while we do not know what it was in particular, we know that it buffeted him; that is to say, it struck him, and as with any physical blow, it seemed to drain him. Thus, with many interpreters, one would say it was some sort of physical ailment. It weakened him and sapped his strength.

Third, it was described as a messenger of Satan. Even though the thorn was from God, it seems as if Satan used this thorn to cause doubts to arise in Paul's mind. As a matter of fact, it is Satan's job, to cause doubt. And if doubts grow, then to cause despair; and if despair grows, then to cause unbelief.

Fourth, it was there so that at no time would Paul have cause to boast in himself or rely on the revelations that God had given him. On the one hand, God had given Paul great gifts by which to proclaim Christ and Him crucified. But on the other, there was a thorn in Paul's flesh, some kind of physical ailment, so that Paul would always realize that God's gifts were not ends in themselves, that God's gifts were just that, gifts, gifts that did not make a person more or less worthy in God's eyes. These gifts were given with a purpose – serve God by serving others.

Indeed, Paul even prayed three times that the thorn might be removed. Perhaps Paul thought he would be all the more effective in his ministry if he did not have this recurring physical ailment.

Three times. One is of course reminded that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed three times for the cup of suffering, the crucifixion, to be removed from His lips. But finally, at the end of the prayer, Jesus said, “Nevertheless, not My will but Thine be done.”

Paul prayed, and he was a real prayer warrior, but at the end of the prayers, God's answer was quite different from that expected by Paul. Paul prayed for a “Yes” for the removal of the thorn. God's answer, however, was “No,” but it was a “No” in which Paul could find strength rather than despair or discouragement.

Now Paul speaks of

3) Real Strength. Paul now found that real strength lay in weakness. Paul found that God's answer was that, “My grace is sufficient for you.” Quite obviously, this is not something that Paul initially wanted, but it was what Paul needed. Thus it was that Paul could boast in his weakness rather than in his strength.

First, when we are weak, God has the chance to prove His strength. All around Paul, his opponents were saying “Look at me! I'm strong! Follow me!” On the other hand, Paul now boasted in his weakness and told the Corinthians, as he tells us, “Follow Christ!”

Second, we see ultimate weakness displayed in Jesus Himself. It was on the Cross that God's strength was made powerful. Jesus was nailed to the Cross by soldiers of one of the most powerful empires the world has ever seen, the Roman empire. Jesus died under Roman authority. Today, the Roman empire is the stuff of history books – but Jesus is alive and well! God's strength was made powerful on the Cross. Because there in Jesus' death our sins were taken away. They were forgiven. And as Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, in that forgiveness we find life and salvation.

Third, in this life we all have our weaknesses. But in weakness, we are thrown on God's strength to sustain us. We are to pray, but in our prayers, we are prepared to see that God's answers our needs in relation to Him rather than our wants in relation to ourselves. Are we always ready to pray the way Jesus prayed: “Thy will be done”?

Daily we pray the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer. God's good and gracious will is indeed done without our prayer, but in this petition we pray that it may be done among us as well. How does this happen? The *Small Catechism* tells us:

When God breaks and hinders every evil counsel and will which would not let us hallow God's name nor let His Kingdom come, such as the will of the devil, the world, and our flesh; but strengthens and preserves us steadfast in His Word and faith unto our end. This is His good and gracious will.

The most important thing is to remain steadfast in God's Word and the one true faith. In spiritual things we can always have complete certainty what the will of God is. In earthly things, however, we should always be praying: “Thy will be done.”

Fourth, the world and Satan and our flesh will tell us again and again that God's blessings are shown in earthly blessings – that is to say, a trouble-free life, health, riches, worldly goods, a long life, and so forth. If illness or weakness exist, then these three fiends say that God should restore us. If there is no restoration, then these fiends would have us doubt – doubt God. They sow the seeds of doubt. Paul had plenty of opportunities to doubt. Why should he have suffered so? Why should he suffer this draining thorn in the flesh? Shouldn't God cure him? This is Satan's greatest tool, to sow seeds of doubt, to undermine faith, to undermine the spiritual foundation upon which believers stand. But faith shows us that just as Jesus went into death for us, so God's power in our lives can be alive in the face of physical infirmity.

Fifth, God's word works through the seemingly weak and simple things of this world. Several years ago, Pastor Bert Naumann underwent an operation on his heart. Before his heart operation we prayed for Pastor Naumann. Before his operation he sent his friends an e-mail. He said: “Regardless of the outcome of the operation, I am 100 per cent sure of the outcome. For Jesus' sake, I am always a child of God.” How

could he have such certainty? Because through Holy Baptism, God's Word, and Holy Communion God has always come to him for Jesus' sake to assure him that in Jesus' death and resurrection he had the promises of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

In comparison to the might of the world, the Word of God always appears weak. But these weak words are always the Word of Life. Regardless of outward circumstances we always have the promise of God of which Paul speaks:

For I am convinced that
neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor principalities,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers,
nor height, nor depth,
nor any other created thing,
shall be able to separate us from the love of God,
which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8,38-39)

Sixth, the purpose of earthly suffering is not always revealed to us. As Paul says to the Corinthians: "Now I look through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13,12). God, however, revealed to Paul what the purpose was of his thorn in the flesh. Sometimes after the fact we can see what the purpose of a particular trying time for us was. But as we journey through life, God calls us to have patience in the face of suffering. We are to have patience so that we may always be certain that He will give to us what is needful for a true and pure faith in Jesus.

Conclusion. When I was a child, usually at the back of comic books, I saw ads for Charles Atlas. In the ad there was a picture of a 98-pound weakling who stood on the beach and was having sand kicked in his face by a bully, who also took Atlas's girlfriend away. The ad said that if you followed the exercise program of Atlas then you too could transform yourself from a 98-pound weakling into a strong man, just like Charles

Atlas. Then, after this transformation, no one would any longer be able to push you around, kick sand in your face, or take away your girl friend. Atlas could boast in his new strength.

The enemies of faith always want to kick doubt in our face. They always want to take away or undermine our faith.

But Paul gives us a different picture. He gives us a picture that real strength lies in weakness. When Paul was weak, God in him was strong. Strong in the sense that the Word of forgiveness was sufficient to allow Paul to live and serve God in power. With Paul can we and all believers boast in the weakness of the Cross. In the death and resurrection we see the weakness and strength of God. The weakness of the Cross is always more powerful than the strength of the world, our flesh, and the devil. On the Cross, Jesus defeated these three enemies. Instead of the power of this world, Jesus gives us forgiveness and eternal life. Then we can say with Paul:

Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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