

When We Are Weak God Is Strong
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – July 5, 2015
2 Corinthians 12: 9 ~ Mark 6: 1-13
Pastor Deb – Christ the King Lutheran Church

Grace to you, and peace in our Lord Jesus, the Savior who loves us so much! Amen.

I'd like to share three brief stories by Max Lucado from his book, You'll Get Through This:

She had a tremble to her, the inner tremble you could feel with just a hand on her shoulder. I saw her in a grocery store....hadn't seen her in months. I asked about her kids and husband, and when I did, her eyes watered, her chin quivered, and her story spilled out. He'd left her. After twenty years of marriage, three kids, and a dozen moves, gone. Traded her in for a younger model. She did her best to maintain her composure but couldn't. The grocery store produce section became a sanctuary of sorts. Right there between the tomatoes and the lettuce, she wept. We prayed. Then I said, "You'll get through this. It won't be painless. It won't be quick. But God will use this mess for good. In the meantime don't be foolish or naïve. But don't despair either. With God's help, you will get through this."

Two days later a friend called. He'd just been fired...it was his fault. He'd made stupid, inappropriate remarks at work (and) his boss kicked him out. Now he's a fifty-seven-year-old unemployed manager in a rotten economy. He feels terrible and sounds worse. Wife angry. Kids confused. He needed assurance, so I gave it: "You'll get through this. It won't be painless. It won't be quick. But God will use this mess for good. In the meantime don't be foolish or naïve. But don't despair either. With God's help, you will get through this."

Then I met a teenager in a café where she works. She's fresh out of high school, hoping to get into college next month. Her life, as it turns out, hasn't been easy. When she was six, her parent's divorced. When she was fifteen, they remarried, only to divorce again a few months ago. Recently, her parents told her to choose: live with Mom or live with Dad. She got misty eyed as she described their announcement. I looked her square in the eyes and gently said: "You'll get through this. It won't be painless. It won't be quick. But God will use this mess for good. In the meantime don't be foolish or naïve. But don't despair either. With God's help, you will get through this." (pp. 3-4)

With God's help, each of us...will get through whatever burden we are carrying. Sounds a bit like the Apostle Paul's statement in our reading from his letter to the Corinthians read earlier in

the service. Paul describes a thorn in his flesh that was not taken away, instead, in his prayer for relief, he heard his Lord say to him: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”* (2 Cor. 12: 9)

Actually, this text from 2 Corinthians has always fascinated me. What is this “third heaven” in or out of body experience Paul writes about in which he was caught up into Paradise and heard things that no mortal is permitted to repeat? Let's unpack this part of his story first.

Historically, the Apostle Paul was perhaps the most passionate, forceful voice of the Gospel following his conversion on the road to Damascus. A Roman citizen, trained rabbi, and determined arm of the High Priest commissioned to stop Jesus followers, he suddenly became an unstoppable, radical force of his own once he met Jesus face to face. Obviously, he is the person in Christ who fourteen years prior was caught up into the third heaven. Apparently, Paul was facing resistance to his spiritual authority as a true apostle, that is, one who had been an eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so, he was sharing his spiritual awakening.

Perhaps you too have heard someone share a vivid dream, a spiritual near death experience, or even an ecstatic moment where someone shares how they have been touched by the power of the Holy Spirit? If so, this is what Paul is doing here. Yet, rather than boasting about his experience or putting on airs that make others feel inadequate for not having such an experience, Paul focuses rather on the hardships, lessons, and burdens that humbled him to accept his humanity: his brokenness and his weakness. Paul describes a “thorn in the flesh” to explain what true spiritual power is all about.

Earlier in his letter, Paul draws on imagery from psalms of lament to describe his apostolic life: afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not destroyed (2 Cor. 4:8-9). Paul was in fact whipped with life threatening forty minus one lashes five times, beaten with rods three times, ship-wrecked and nearly lost at sea where few in ancient times dared venture for fear of both dangerous storms and robbers on the sea that would cut your throat just for the thrill of it. Yet, in all this, says Paul, God never abandoned him. There was only one hardship Paul begged to God for relief...this mysterious “thorn in his flesh.”

Historians have suggested several possibilities, the most likely a virulent malarial fever that haunted the coast of the Mediterranean, yet Paul writes to keep his pride in check, the Lord

would NOT release him from this one torment. Why? To reveal through the gift of GRACE that the power of God is made perfect in our human weakness.

The Greek word for “perfect” is translated as “reaching full maturity.” In other words, Paul is saying that as we mature in our faith, we recognize our weaknesses and our limits, and we rely even more deeply on the power of Christ dwelling in us. The “power” to point to Jesus as the perfecter of our faith; the one whose forgiving grace shines through us when we are most vulnerable; and reveals our mortal weakness is Jesus. HE alone gives us the spiritual authority to proclaim GOOD NEWS to those who so desperately need it.

And so, like Max, we can truly hear the pain of another with a heart of grace and remind one another, you will get through this, *“You'll get through this. It won't be painless. It won't be quick. But God will use this mess for good. In the meantime don't be foolish or naïve. But don't despair either. With God's help, you will get through this.”*

Hopefully, some of you read the poem prayer written by a Swedish minister of music that Brigitta Rice gave me permission to share in our “What's Happening” email this week. If not, I would like to share Gunnel Rask's amazing poem prayer with you again. Here is its Swedish translation:

**God, don't give us any hope
right now
which takes away from
daring to see the brokenness
within ourselves
and around us.**

**Don't give us strength
or new power to pass by
our vulnerability; our body
-what is, is what it is.
But the reality and
the pain of the truth., You share.**

By Gunnel Rask, April 2015

Gunnel Rask captures what I have had the privilege of witnessing as your Pastor of Congregation Care as I have walked beside many in our community who are facing great loss; hardships beyond their power to endure; and even the dark valley of the shadow of impending death. There is a point in our human journey where nothing matters but Jesus. In faith, we cling to His promise to rescue us in our weakness through the power of His Holy Spirit. We trust that

Jesus will meet us and bring peace and newness of life that we could never find on our own. And we look beyond the boundaries of this world's authority; medical determination; and intervention to a truth that ultimately sets us free. Remembering how Jesus said from his cross, "Father, Forgive them..." we realize that God in Christ fully shares the painful truth that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. The mortal body cannot put on mortality and the perishable cannot put on imperishability WITHOUT the power unleashed in perfect love, poured out and freely given to all who come.

God's voice speaks to us gently, in the midst of our broken relationships; broken dreams; mistakes and wrong choices and simply says, "*My grace is sufficient EVEN IN THIS! Hang on. You'll get through this! I am working all things together for good. My son...Jesus, fully shared the painful truth and weight of human sin and brokenness, and HIS grace is ultimately sufficient.*" Bottom line, my friends...THIS IS GOOD NEWS!

And so, today, we remind ourselves that this life isn't just about me or you. It is about US. Like Paul, our lives are to be spent building up one another in love, growing together amid all that we experience, into the full maturity as human beings which is possible only in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

You have no idea what power is unleashed when you pray for one another. You have no idea how life giving it is to see goodness and possibility in every situation rather than grumble or complain. You perhaps might never realize what that caring phone call, loving card, or hot meal meant to someone who is incapacitated by grief. What you DO know is that Christ's grace IS SUFFICIENT, and his power is unleashed in the body of believers who embrace their weakness with expectant faith. So take your life...just as it is, and let God use it for His glory; for truly WE WILL ALL GET THROUGH THIS and GRACE will lead us home. Amen!