

## **This Lively Experiment**

2 Corinthians 12: 1-10

*14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 5<sup>th</sup> July 2009*

“If I must boast,” wrote Paul, “I will boast of the things that show my weakness (2 Cor. 11:30).” We don’t hear talk like this everyday. It’s Paul’s response to those in the Corinthian church who accused him of having a big head, who were questioning some of his claims and thereby questioning his authority over them. He doesn’t respond with a litany substantiating his claims, his authority, his experience. Instead, still being faithful to his conscience he offers a counter-intuitive argument. If he is going to be charged with having a boastful spirit, then let the judge declare him guilty; guilty, boasting not of his strengths, but of his *weaknesses*.

That’s not the kind of argument we’re used to hearing. It’s counter-intuitive, not what we expect, irrational, even counter-cultural: boasting of weakness instead of strength. Boasting of strength – we know what that means, we can imagine that quite easily, we know what bombastic displays of strength and power look like, feel like, we’ve seen people celebrate it, worship it, glory in it, remind others of it; heck, we’ve done it ourselves.

But boasting in weakness? Now “that’s a horse of a different color.” Where are bombastic displays celebrating weakness, glorifying, worshipping weakness? Where are we freely exposing our weaknesses, being grateful for them?

Yet, this is precisely the way Paul responds to his accusers. He doesn’t want to puff himself up; he’s willing to be the fool. He’s not willing to boast in the strength of his claims, but say he’s weak. He was given a thorn in the flesh precisely to keep him from being too elated. We’re not sure what it was, it could have been suffering from an eye condition. Three times he asked the Lord to remove the thorn. Each time he heard back, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

There it is again – this counter-intuitive, even irrational response to the way we’ve come to expect the world to work. *God’s* grace is sufficient – which means in everything else we can be insufficient and be okay. Power is made perfect in weakness – which means that *God’s* display of power is known most profoundly *not* in times or expressions of brute force and strength but precisely in those moments when we acknowledge our weakness, our frailty, our fragility. Paul takes this approach, not because strength is inherently bad (because it’s not), but because when we think our strength and individual resources are sufficient, then there’s no perceived need for *God’s* grace. If we rely upon our strength, we effectively move *God* out of the picture. When we are counting on our own resources and wisdom, then we push *God* to the side. Why does Paul boast in his weakness? “So that the power of Christ [that is, not his power] may dwell in me.”

There it is again, this counter-intuitive move, this irrational, paradoxical, counter-cultural maneuver: we are strongest – with the power of Christ at work within us – when we are at our weakest. When we are weak and acknowledge we are weak, fragile, frail, insufficient then we

can be open to the sufficiency of God's grace; when we confess our need, our lack, then we can be open to what God will provide, what God will give.

Paul can even make this profound claim, "I am content with weaknesses, insult, hardships, persecutions, and calamities," and he experienced them all. Why? Not to be a martyr, but for the sake of Christ. Because "whenever I am weak, then I am strong." Paul's confession here reflects the insights of an extremely mature person of faith. You don't come to this kind of wisdom easily and it's not found in books. Lincoln's (1812-1865) words on the bulletin cover reflect such a spirit.<sup>1</sup> You can't teach this to someone else, you can't learn it in church school or discover it from listening to a sermon. It's the kind of personal knowledge one comes to know through experience – through suffering, pain, hardship – his experience of what it's like to know the power of Christ in one's life.

Needless to say, this understanding of weakness and strength has never been well-received by Christians or the church, particularly when the church got itself mixed up with political, economic, and cultural power. Sadly, the church likes power through strength. The church wants to have influence, authority, we want to be liked, and in our long history we had plenty of low moments when the church sold its soul for the sake of being "popular," displaying its power through a monarch or army. Think of the church's welcome embrace when Emperor Constantine (c.272-337) made Christianity the religion of the empire in 312 A.D., or when the Pope had his own army and led them into battle (why did the Pope need an army?); or during the Protestant Reformation when the reformers sought the protection of the monarchs in their cause, or the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598) and the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) between Protestants and Catholics; or when Protestants tried to set up theocracies (like the Puritans settlement in Massachusetts). All kind of abuses took place.

Yet, it's a *weakness exuding strength* that remains at the heart of the Christian confession. There's no way around this. It's a weakness we don't eagerly embrace, because we would rather replace weakness with strength, hide weakness behind a persona or mask of strength. Never let anyone see you weak. Always be strong. But that's not the Christian way; despising weakness can actually be an anti-Christian, the way of anti-Christ.

In 1888, the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote a scathing polemic against Christianity, entitled *The Anti-Christ*. It was a summary of everything he earlier wrote regarding Christianity, this son of a Lutheran pastor. Nietzsche saw the 19<sup>th</sup> century expression of Christianity as the source for all that was wrong in the world. He asked, "What is good? -- All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad? -- All that proceeds from weakness. What is happiness? -- The feeling that power increases...Not contentment, but more power; not peace at all, but war; not virtue, but proficiency, ... The weak and ill-constituted shall perish: first principle of our philosophy....What is more harmful than any vice? Active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak -- Christianity."<sup>2</sup> This from a man who saw actively caring for the weak in our society as a weakness that had to be overcome, the

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<sup>1</sup> "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for the day."

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1944), 114-115.

weak removed from society. Is it any wonder that Nietzsche was suspicious of democracies? And why so much of his philosophy was adopted by the National Socialist movement in Hitler's Germany.

I share this to form a sharp contrast with the vision our founders aspired to realize for this nation, this "lively experiment" in democracy that we celebrate this weekend. This experiment has to do with freedom, of course, and the degree to which a government will allow its people freedom to form its Constitution, elect its leaders, acknowledge inalienable rights, equal rights for the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, those with influence and authority and those without, provide freedom of the individual to pursue happiness as one so chooses happiness, providing it does not incur harm on others, freedom to believe or not.

"Lively experiment" was the way King Charles II (1630-1685) described his charter to the Rhode Island colony in 1663. Is it possible for people to live with free expression and religious freedom? Since then, these two items have been inseparable. There was no freedom of religion and therefore no freedom of expression anywhere in the colonies (or the Christian world, for that matter) at this time. Rhode Island is the first place in history where no established faith and full freedom to practice any faith or no faith at all was put into practice. The Maryland colony (*Terra Maria*, as it was known) was chartered with religious toleration for Catholics and Protestants in 1632. The 1649 religious toleration act was limited to Trinitarian Christians in Maryland, but did not grant the freedom not to believe. In 1650, Reformed Christians outlawed Catholicism *and* Anglicanism in Maryland.

Roger Williams (1603-1683) considered the Massachusetts Bay colony "corrupt" because it mixed church and state. Williams demanded a "wall of separation" between the state and the church in order to guard the "garden of the church" from the "wilderness of the world." During his trial Williams ensured his condemnation by affirming religious freedom, what Williams called "soul liberty," for every person. He wanted Rhode Island to be "a haven for the cause of conscience."<sup>3</sup>

While we join Americans across this nation celebrating our liberties and freedoms, as *Christians* we also need to celebrate and give thanks to God, not because the founders were Christian, many were, but not all and some were even antagonistic to orthodox Christianity, like Jefferson (1743-1826), but thankful for religious freedom, because religious freedom – separation of church and state – is intricately connected to the larger concept of political freedom that we celebrate this weekend. Religious liberty led the way to liberty for all. How we make space for those who believe or don't believe informs the way we make space for our fellow citizens in this republic. However, this is always a precious, fragile undertaking.

Even after signing the *Declaration of Independence* and well beyond the formation of the *Constitution*, the question of religious freedom was still in question. Religious freedom wasn't

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<sup>3</sup> See Barbara Vowell's editorial, "A Plantation to be Proud Of," which appeared in Sunday's New York Times, July 5, 2009, referring to many of the same quotes and themes highlighted in the sermon: [www.nytimes.com/2009/07/05/opinion/05vowell.html?scp=2&sq=rhode%20island&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/05/opinion/05vowell.html?scp=2&sq=rhode%20island&st=cse)

granted here because it was a noble, radical, progressive idea (which it was and is), but because no religious group was strong enough to establish and enforce religion in America. The Anglicans were the majority in Virginia (and just barely tolerated Presbyterians), the Presbyterians were in New Jersey, and the Puritans held sway in New England. Because religious traditions were equally weak they made space for each other. The only way to ensure religious freedom for all the groups in America (and there were many) was to guarantee it for all the other groups.<sup>4</sup> Later, Thomas Jefferson in his famous *Letter to the Virginia Baptists* in 1808, wrote, “We have solved by fair experiment the great and interesting question whether freedom of religion is compatible with order in government and obedience to laws.” Jefferson wanted a wall to protect the state from the church; Williams wanted a wall to protect the church from the state.

But have we really “solved” it? This “lively experiment”—this uniquely American experiment – cannot be taken for granted. The Constitution might guarantee religious freedom, but there are always forces at work who want to take it away, to chip away at it. It’s really very fragile, very weak. The experiment continues. The revolutionary spirit in Iran these past weeks against the theocratic regime should warn us of that dangerous cocktail when religion and authoritarian power mix. There is no place for the religious minority in Iran, there are no rights guaranteed to them, they are vulnerable, weak indeed. We need to be wary of those who claim the strength and authority to assert one religious view in American society at the expense of the weak. We need to be wary of those who try to assert a theocracy and those on the left who try to take away religious rights. A government of the people cannot make the minority suffer at the hands of the majority.

Now, you’re probably wondering where I’m going with all of this. I’ve veered far from the scriptural text– and I’m not exactly sure how to get back there! There’s not a direct correlation between what Paul is talking about and what I’m trying to say. John Witherspoon (1723-1794), the Presbyterian minister-signer of the Declaration said, “Never rise to speak till you have something to say; and when you have said it, cease.” So, I will say this, and then cease.

The Christian way that values weakness, allows us to be weak, and thereby calls us to protect the weak because of what God might be saying and doing through the weak, eventually leads to the democratic idea. And this idea, this experiment is, itself, fragile – and needs to be preserved.

This lively, this American experiment elevates “individual conscience” – which is what Paul was staking his claim on, speaking with conviction about his experience and being faithful to his conscience. The individual whenever compared with the power and influence of the collective, or “the crowd,” as Kierkegaard warned, or “the herd,” as Nietzsche termed it, is extraordinarily weak indeed. That’s why we need to preserve the rights of the individual. In celebrating the liberty of the individual conscience (which is a Reformed idea that goes back to Calvin’s Geneva, which was not a theocracy but a city for religious refugees from across Europe persecuted for their belief), we find a government that celebrates and, at its best, “protects the autonomy and liberty of the individual. Here the state limits itself. Here the state protects the

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<sup>4</sup> See Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963, 16ff.

rights of the minority from the convictions of the majority, even though the majority doesn't like it."<sup>5</sup>

John Buchanan, former moderator of the General Assembly, one of the great preachers and leaders of our denomination makes this point, "At our best we have understood that individual rights are at the heart of this experiment and that individuals are protected, nurtured, cared for, that because God is sovereign and all people are children of God, there are no unimportant people, no throw away people."

Every generation has to work hard to ensure the rights and freedom of *all* people within American society. We are truly "strong," in a biblical sense of the term, when the weak are cared for, respected, when the minority is given a voice. This is, perhaps, America's greatest strength and the greatest gift, among many, we have to give to the world. Maybe – just maybe – Paul had something to do with all of this and maybe even Calvin.

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<sup>5</sup> John Buchanan, "Knowing Whom to Obey," Sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, July 2, 2000.