

Pentecost 6, 7.4.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Ezekiel 2:1-5; Psalm 123; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

“Strength in Weakness”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

A blessed Independence Day to you all. May God continue to grant us the faith to follow Jesus, living within his liberating grace, while serving others in this nation and world God so loves. Amen.

It is significant how the readings appointed for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost also comment upon a nation, society and its peoples. For example Ezekiel reads, “*Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me...*” These words imply that without faith and trust in God, we are rebellious. However, when we follow God daily, we are freed to love God and serve others.

Again, in the gospel reading for today, Jesus came to his hometown of Nazareth, and the people far from being open to welcome him, “*took offense at him.*” This is another reminder of how human societies can make poor judgments about those sent to lead them. Those who “knew” Jesus as a boy said, “*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?*” Jesus’ own community was incapable of seeing Jesus in a new way. Their over-familiarity with him brought about contempt. They knew him as a carpenter, a tradesman, and were therefore incapable of seeing Jesus revealed in his full humanity, glimpsing even his divinity.

So Jesus said to them, “*Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.*” It is a common enough phenomenon. Knowing someone’s past does not always allow us to share in their present life and future work.

In this story Jesus reveals his strength in weakness. Mark tells us, “*And he could do no deed of power there...and he was amazed at their unbelief.*” These words allow us to see the relationship between faith and Jesus’ power. Faith gives access to Jesus, and so Mark tells us that because they did not believe they also did not have access to the liberating healing that Jesus gives. Jesus’ own hometown was also rebellious; they thought they had Jesus all figured out. In the words of Ezekiel, they were “*impudent and stubborn.*”

Faith is the opposite of unbelief. Faith is trust and belief that in God the impossible is possible. Faith allows us to move from weakness to strength, not by our own power, but by the presence of someone stronger than ourselves. Faith allows us to not only face death, but more importantly, to

live. Faith makes us alive; faith makes us fully human.

No one knew this more than Paul. Paul knew his own weakness and wrote about it very openly in today's reading: *"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."* That word, "elated," is *hyperairomai* and the prefix "hyper" should be an easy hint as to its meaning, which is to be "hyper-elated" about oneself. This is why, of course, the word is also translated as "conceited."

There has been much debate about what Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was. Scholars have ventured to guess, headaches, epilepsy, failing eyesight. However, what is important to see here is that though Paul prayed that this affliction be removed, God said to him, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."* Paul prayed that his affliction might be taken from him, but God answered, as God answers many prayers, rather than taking it away, God gave Paul the strength to bear it.

This is how God works. God does not spare us things, rather, God gives us the strength to bear, and in bearing, overcome our afflictions. In doing so we become able to help others in their suffering because we know the presence of God in weakness. So Paul wrote, *"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."* This is grace.

During the Second World War, Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was imprisoned for being part of the plot to remove Hitler from power. Bonhoeffer was arrested, imprisoned and eventually killed at Flossenbürg concentration camp in April 1945. Like Paul, Bonhoeffer knew strength in weakness through Christ by suffering with and for others. In a letter written from prison to his friend, Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer wrote, "God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which God is with us and helps us...only the suffering God can help." Bonhoeffer, and many others like him, have known the truth of Paul's words, *"for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."*

Today as we remember independence and freedom, we also remember that we too are also in need of the God's grace, grace that truly liberates and frees us from the sin and "hyper-elation" of our self-centered humanity. We are also a rebellious house, people who, time and time again, refuse to hear the voice of Jesus calling us to love our neighbor, feed the hungry and thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick, dying and imprisoned. We refuse to recognize Jesus in our midst in the person of another color, ethnicity or gender, in the person of the refugee and stranger. We refuse to see

Jesus in the weakest among us. We would rather hear our own voices, choose our own prophets, follow our own path, rather than hearing the voice of Jesus, and following him in service to others.

It may have been some time since you last read Martin Luther's small book titled, *The Freedom of a Christian*. In that book Luther argued that God frees us from sin, giving us grace to serve others. We become weak for the sake of serving others. Luther wrote,

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

In Christ, we are perfectly free - freed from sin - so that we might dutifully serve others. Perfect freedom comes from believing in the grace of Jesus Christ, who frees us from the sin of human "hyper-lation" about ourselves so that we might freely serve others. In Christ, true freedom comes with responsibility for the well-being of our life together in human society.

Someone whose writings I have read and admired for many years is Peter F. Drucker, the management consultant and educator, who is often called "the founder of modern management." A naturalized citizen of the United States, Drucker received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2002. In an essay titled, "The Freedom of Industrial Man," Drucker wrote regarding freedom,

Real freedom is not freedom from something, that would be license. It is freedom to choose between doing or not doing something, to act one way or another, to hold one belief or the opposite... [freedom is] the heaviest burden laid on humanity: to decide one's own individual conduct as well as the conduct of society and to be responsible for both decisions.

Freedom comes with the responsibility to act for oneself and for society. Like Luther, Drucker was pointing to the responsibility of living for something more than oneself, of living for others in human society. Indeed, two of Drucker's early writings were, like those of Bonhoeffer, banned by the Nazis for his advocacy of the Jewish people. Freedom is the heaviest burden laid upon humanity because it involves living for and acting with others. Freedom involves shaping the world out of our weakness, so that all people might know compassion, justice and abundance. Luther wrote that a Christian is made perfectly free in Christ with a purpose: so that they may become "dutiful servants of all, subject to all." Luther was expressing the absolute freedom that Christ gives to humanity in living for others, society and the world.

The world hasn't changed much from Jesus' own day. Humanity is still rebellious; we continue to choose our own way instead of the way of Jesus and his cross. We are still "hyper-elated" about ourselves, thinking we are all powerful. Though our world has progressed scientifically, rather than

being diminished, the ethical questions of human life remain undiminished. The question of whether and how we are responsible citizens, of our maturity as members of our societies, states, corporations, and churches still remains.

When Jesus sent his disciples out two by two, he sent them with only one thing: his authority over the unclean spirits of this world. Jesus spoke very directly to them: they were to take no food, no bag, no money, and no change of clothes. They were to rely utterly upon the power and authority of Jesus, taking nothing that would distract them from the one who had sent them.

In Christ, the grace of God grants the freedom to act for others; this is freedom to reimagine a world and society for others; this is freedom to lift others up as Christ has lifted us up. Jesus lifts us so that we might lift others. In the midst of the world's "hyper-elation" with itself, Jesus comes to strengthen the weak, so that freed in Christ, we might live for and shape the world for others. True freedom is not the power to do whatever I want, as Peter Drucker said, "that would be license." True freedom is to act with compassion for others.

On this day celebrating independence and freedom, I ask, "To what do you look for strength and freedom in your life?" Like the disciples sent out two by two, Jesus sends us from this place with his grace, liberating us with true freedom to freely serve others.

Take heart and believe that in Christ all things are possible and all burdens bearable. Christ sends us forth every day into a world in need of grace. Go from this place into the world again with Christ. Let Christ be your freedom and your strength in weakness.

God's grace is sufficient "for power is made perfect in weakness." Amen.