

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Year B, Proper 9
July 5, 2009
2 Corinthians 12:2-10

In the name of the one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the first year that I have had the task of preaching on the July 4th holiday weekend. I didn't know what to expect when I came to church this morning. I'm glad to see you all made it! This is a Sunday notorious for low attendance at church. And I knew Susan would be away. David would be away. Tom would be away. Meredith would be away. On one hand, with all the big cats away, I was giddy with power. On the other hand, I was concerned NO ONE would show up for church! Again, I knew it was a holiday weekend.

But then a new concern arose once I read the lessons for today. This is a weekend in which we celebrate the political and military strength of our country, and I am going to preach on the passage from Second Corinthians we just heard. And I feel I need to illustrate how the celebration of this national holiday and the celebration of the Eucharist have very little in common - while not getting run out of the church for being at best - a party pooper and at worst - an unpatriotic American!

Maybe you, like me, went out to see some fireworks this weekend. Perhaps you heard the familiar words of our national anthem sung on TV, or on the National Mall, at a baseball game, or somewhere else within this land of the free and home of the brave.

Yes, this is a WEEKEND for celebrating freedom, freedom that relies on our strength as a country.

Yet, this is the DAY where we celebrate a different kind of freedom: the freedom that comes from relying not on our own strength, not on our own power, but, instead, a freedom which comes from grace – from power being made perfect in weakness, power made perfect through the death of Jesus Christ on a wooden cross.

This is the power and the strength which comes into our lives when we come to the communion rail to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord. It is a power born of brokenness rather than wholeness, a power born of being poured out rather than staying held together.

A Catholic priest puts it nicely in an article recommended to me by my Spiritual Director. This priest notes that “the Eucharist only achieves its graced entrance into our lives if it is broken and distributed. Thus it is the liability of Christ to suffer, his ability to be broken and shed that makes his priesthood effective and his Eucharist possible (Because Beset by Weakness, by Michael J. Buckley, S.J.)”

It is only in brokenness that Christ is able to continue to make his power available to us all. And, it is only through our own weakness that we can fully open ourselves to God's grace and power, which is far mightier than anything we can claim on our own.

Of course, that doesn't make it any easier for you or I to give up the control we feel we have over our lives, or at least the desire and hope for that control, for the ability to trust and rely on ourselves, our wits, our strength.

For, here again we have the Gospel message (though the lesson is from Second Corinthians the concept is absolutely central to our understanding of the Gospel) running right up against the messages we hear just about everywhere else:

Be strong.
Live Strong!
Win.
Excel.

Lead.
Exceed expectations.
Reach your full potential!

Hearing only those messages, I would never be able to stand here and tell you how weak a priest you have in your pulpit.

I would never dare to illustrate how weak and powerless Jesus looks in today's gospel. Was he really able to do NO deeds of power in his hometown?

I would never try to figure out just what Paul is trying to say in this letter to the Corinthians.

I would strive to be just like the super-apostles Paul is railing against in his letter.

I would stand here and have you believe how strong I am, how worthy I am of your confidence in me, how unbroken and with-it I am, how smart, assured, and steady.

And I would be preaching the Gospel in word only. I would be living a lie.
An imposter would be standing before you.

So what is the alternative?

Paul's conclusion was that he, in his leadership role in the church, could still boast - not of his strength - but of his weakness. On the surface, this seems to me like being really proud about how humble one might be!

Paul says, "So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 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."

Again, on the surface, this doesn't really work for me. Paul, or others who act like this and boast in this way, would come off as living martyrs.

Is that what we are supposed to be about as followers of Christ?
I don't think so.

So, personally, I am stuck within the ongoing struggle to balance coming to terms with my own weakness and at the same time living into my role as a leader, as a priest, and as a fellow pilgrim.

I know I am not alone in this struggle to balance accepting the weakness of which Paul speaks and the authority necessary to make things happen in our families and workplaces.

Paul, as confusing as his prose is, helps us out with this struggle. The message in Second Corinthians is relatively clear, but it important to understand Paul's context so we can get the full thrust of his message.

Certainly, strength was celebrated during the time Paul wrote this letter. Strength in mind, body and spirit gave you authority and power over others. Knowledge and experience, as they are today, were means of great power.

The so-called "superapostles" knew this. Superapostles - it's a great image isn't it? I can see the first century superapostles running around like modern day superheroes.

In reality, the superapostles went about the towns and villages proclaiming that they had personal revelations from God that gave them special authority in the community.

You can probably think of a few religious celebrities today who seem to come from the same mold. Many

of these folks make me nervous. I am terribly suspect of people who seek to take their own experiences of God and use them to gain power over another.

That was never what Jesus had in mind. Our authority doesn't come from having power over anyone in the church; it comes from sharing power with God and one another.

Paul understood this. As one commentator puts it, "[Paul's] inward experiences deepen his faith, but they do not constitute a basis for his authority over the church. That authority rests not upon what he has experienced in an inward, private way, but on the manner in which he is living the gospel in their midst (John T. McFadden in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, p 208*)."

It is this authority that Paul is trying to draw upon in his arguments with the superapostles. Paul is trying to establish to "one extent or another, that [his seeming weakness] is actually what gives [him] power, since it participates in the power of Christ's ministry through weakness (Stephen P Ahearne-Kroll in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, p 209*)."

And here we have a message from today's letter – a message easy to say yet hard to live: I believe Paul is helping folks in Corinth and folks in Bethesda understand that we must let go of our need for control, our striving for perfection, our desire for self reliance, and become vulnerable to our friends, our spouses and partners, our colleagues and our God.

We need to create the space for God to enter into our lives and for God to fill the empty space we have created through claiming our weakness with a strength beyond our knowing – with a strength that comes straight from the grounds of Golgotha, from Christ's humiliating death, from a grace that is complete in its sufficiency, from power made perfect in weakness.

Recognizing our own weakness in fact relates us to God in a new way. This allows us to recognize grace acting in our lives, allows us to meet God's power, invite God's power into our lives, and share that power with each other.

As the article I mentioned earlier states, "Weakness is the context for the epiphany of the Lord, it is the night in which he appears -- not always as felt reassurance, but more often as a power to continue, faithful even when we do not feel the strength, even when fidelity means simply putting one foot in front of the other (Because Beset by Weakness, by Michael J. Buckley, S.J.)."

This is the power we must share with one another. Not the giddiness which comes from having all the big cats away. Not the power we exercise over another person. Not the power that comes from military or political strength.

The power we share comes from God's willingness to be broken and poured out for all of us.

That is the power made perfect in weakness we celebrate today.

That is the power we share with Christ and one another through the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, as we are reminded again that the grace of Jesus Christ is sufficient for us all.

Amen.