

This Lively Experiment

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

6th Sunday after Pentecost/ 4th July 2021

“If I must boast,” wrote Paul, “I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (2 Cor. 11:30). He wrote this to the church in Corinth where some were doubting his theological claims and questioning his authority. He didn’t respond by pulling rank or asserting his authority. Instead, he offered a counter-intuitive argument. Go ahead, charge me with a boastful spirit. Guilty. Not for boasting about my strengths, I will boast of my *weaknesses*.

That’s not the kind of argument we’re used to hearing. It’s irrational, even counter cultural. Boasting about strength, we know what that means. But boasting about weakness? That’s unheard of. When are we ever invited to celebrate weakness? What if we had a Celebrate Your Weakness Sunday? Would you come? Do you glory in and take delight in your weaknesses? When we do confess a weakness, are we really grateful for it?

And, yet this is precisely the way Paul responds to his accusers. He doesn’t want to puff himself up. We know that Paul was given a “thorn in the flesh” precisely to keep him from being too elated. We’re not sure what it was; it was probably an eye condition. Something. Three times he asked the Lord to remove it. Each time he heard back, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

There it is again, this counter-intuitive, irrational response. It’s not the way the world works. Instead, we hear that *God’s* grace is sufficient, which means that everything else in us can be *insufficient* and still be okay. Power is made perfect in weakness, which means that *God’s* display of power is known most profoundly *not* in expressions of brute force or strength but in those moments when we acknowledge our weakness, our frailty, our fragility, and risk being vulnerable. Paul takes this approach, not because strength is inherently bad (it’s not), but because he knows that when we think our strength and individual resources are sufficient, there’s no perceived need for God’s grace. If we rely only upon our strength, we effectively move God out of the picture. When we rely on our own resources and wisdom, we then push God to the side. Why does Paul boast in his weakness? He says, “So that the power of Christ [that is, not his power] may dwell in me” (2 Cor. 12:9).

There it is again, this counter-intuitive move, this irrational, paradoxical, counter-cultural maneuver: it is possible to be strong when we are weak because of the power of Christ at work within us. The strong love of God was demonstrated to the world in Christ’s weakness on the cross. When we are weak and acknowledge that we are weak, fragile, frail, insufficient, then we can open up 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. We might, in time, even become thankful for our weaknesses.

Paul could, then, make an even bolder claim, “I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.” And he experienced them all. Why does he say this? Not to be a martyr, but for the sake of Christ. Because, he says, “...whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10).

Paul’s statement reflects the insights of an extremely mature person of faith. You don’t come to this kind of spiritual and psychological wisdom easily. And it isn’t found in books. You can’t teach this to someone; you can’t learn it in church school or discover it from listening to a sermon or to many sermons. It’s the kind of personal knowledge one comes to know through experience—through suffering, pain, and hardship.

Needless to say, this understanding of weakness and strength has never been well received by Christians or the Church, particularly when the Church gets seduced by political, economic, and cultural power. Historically, the Church gets into trouble and the gospel is betrayed when we want to be “strong,” when we want influence, power, authority, when we want to be big and influential, when we want to grow, when we want to be liked. In our long history we’ve had plenty of low moments when the Church sold its soul to be “popular,” to be strong.

Still, the Spirit calls us back to this central truth of the Christian life: *weakness can exude strength*. Yet, we are reluctant to be weak because we would rather be strong. Or we hide our weakness behind a persona or mask of strength to make others believe that we’re strong. Never let anyone see you weak, we often hear. Too many men believe this and say it to their sons. Always be strong. This is toxic masculinity. But it’s not the Christian way. In fact, despising weakness can actually be anti-Christ.

In 1888, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote his work *The Anti-Christ*, a scathing polemic against Christianity. This son of a Lutheran pastor, Nietzsche saw nineteenth century European Christianity as the source of all that was wrong in the world. “What is good?” he asked. “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.”¹ He viewed actively caring for the vulnerable in society as a weakness, a weakness that needed to be overcome, with the weak removed from society. Is it any wonder that Nietzsche was suspicious of democracies and became the poster child of Hitler’s Germany? This attitude is still very much with us, I’m afraid. This authoritarian toxic masculinity today can even be found in the church.

I share this to create a sharp contrast with the vision our founders aspired to realize for this nation, this “lively experiment” in democracy that we celebrate this holiday weekend. After the violent, brutal insurrection attempt at the U. S. Capitol earlier this year, where toxic masculinity mixed with religious fervor was on full display, we have a renewed sense of just how valuable democracy really is, as well as how weak and tenuous it is. Even after 245 years, we are still engaged in this lively experiment. This experiment has to do with freedom, of course, and the degree to which a government will allow its people freedom to draft its Constitution,

elect its leaders, acknowledge unalienable rights, equal rights for both 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 the harm of others, freedom to believe or not. These rights extend to most, but certainly not all people at the time, as we sadly know.

“Lively experiment” was the way King Charles II (1630-1685) described his charter to the Rhode Island colony in 1663. The experiment was this: 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). Rhode Island was 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.² The questions around religious liberty paved the way for liberty for all.

How we make space for those who believe and those who don’t informs the way we make space for our fellow citizens in this republic on a variety of issues. As we know, this is a precious, fragile undertaking. It’s a delicate dance. There is the will of the majority, but the majority has responsibility to care for the views and positions of the minority. The minority, those without power, the “weak,” need to be respected and honored.

A Christian way that honors weakness allows us to be weak, and invites us to enter the world of those without power, without influence, without rights, which then informs our call to protect the weak because of what God might be saying and doing through them. This distinctively *Christian* idea eventually leads to the democratic idea. And this idea, this experiment is, itself, fragile—and needs to be preserved. This lively, uniquely American experiment elevates “individual conscience,” which is what Paul was staking his claim on, and speaking with conviction about his experience and being faithful to his conscience. One of the things I most cherish about being Presbyterian is that our polity is designed to preserve the liberty of the conscience, to ensure that nothing binds the conscience of another, for “God alone is Lord of the conscience.”³ It also means that we need to make space for the minority voice within the body of Christ. The individual, whenever compared with the power and influence of the collective, or “the crowd,” as Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) warned, or “the herd,” as Nietzsche called it, is extraordinarily weak indeed. That’s why we need to preserve the rights of the individual and make space for the minority.

In order to preserve an individual’s freedom of conscience, this Reformed idea that goes back to John Calvin’s (1509-1564) Geneva, we need a government that celebrates and, at its best, “protects the autonomy and liberty of the individual. Here the state limits itself. [And the] state protects the rights of the minority from the convictions of the majority, even though the majority doesn’t like it.”⁴ John Buchanan, former moderator of the General Assembly, one of the great preachers and leaders of our denomination made 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.”⁵

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 and respected, and when minorities are protected and given a voice. Maybe, just maybe, Paul had something to do with all of this and maybe even Calvin. This is, perhaps, America’s greatest strength and the greatest gift, of many, which we give to the world.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1944), 114-115.

² 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.

³ The Westminster Confession of Faith states, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.” “Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable: We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and security, and at the same time, be equal and common to all others.” (F-3.0101). *Historic Principles of Church Order, Book of Order*, Presbyterian Church (USA).

⁴ John Buchanan, “Knowing Whom to Obey,” Sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, July 2, 2000.

⁵ John Buchanan