

# *Ascension Lutheran Church*

*Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of July 5, 2009*

## When We Are Weak, Then We Are Strong (2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Second Corinthians, verses 9 and 10:

St. Paul writes, "Three times I pleaded the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me...For when I am weak, then I am strong."

This is the text.

Dear friends in Christ, I would like to talk to you today about a man named George Washington Carver. He was a scientist from Missouri. He died in 1943. He is best known for his research on alternative crops to cotton and promoting these alternative crops in the southern United States. Peanuts were his specialty. It is said that he discovered more than three hundred uses for peanuts. He was a man of faith as well with a profound sense of humility. He once had this to say: "When I was young, I said to God, 'God, tell me the mystery of the universe.' But God answered, 'That knowledge is reserved for Me alone.' So I said, 'God, tell me the mystery of the peanut.' Then God said, 'Well, George, that's more nearly your size.' And He told me."

This helps put things in perspective. Scientists say the universe is approximately 93 billion light years from one end to the other. That means if you went the speed of light it would take 93 billion years to get to the other side. And when we consider that God created this massive space and it all fits in His hand. The awesome infinity and All-powerful nature of our God is truly inspiring, not to mention humbling.

In our passage for meditation today St. Paul speaks of being humbled as well. He saw something that none of us have ever seen. God gave him a vision of paradise. Paul said he was caught up to the third heaven. This third heaven is beyond the earth's atmosphere; it is beyond outer space. The third heaven refers to the paradise of heaven. He heard things there that man may not utter. We aren't told what he heard. It is a holy mystery for now.

Imagine seeing the things he must have seen. It would be easy to get a little puffed up with pride. But God wanted to keep Paul humble; so He sent him a thorn in the flesh. What it was we're not told. Whatever this thorn was must not have been a piece of cake. Paul pleaded with the Lord three times for this thorn to be removed. But the Lord said only this, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

The short answer to Paul's prayer was "No", at least "Not yet". Paul's thorn would persist but he had a great consolation prize, something far better; he had God's grace. This thorn made Paul weak; he didn't want it. But there was a purpose to the thorn.

There was a purpose to his weakness. Paul said, “When I am weak, then I am strong”. Human weakness provides the ideal opportunity for the display of God’s power. Perhaps you have a thorn in the flesh; perhaps more than one. Thorns can take the form of illness, sore joints, weak eyesight, poor hearing and virtually any physical setback. Fears and anxieties can be thorns in the flesh. Any weakness in body or soul can be a thorn.

We all have our thorns in the flesh. We all have our weaknesses. We have weaknesses in our character. Perhaps you are prone to be hot tempered or you tend to see the glass half empty. Perhaps there is a struggle with a spirit of lust or perhaps there is a tendency to worry about things. These are character flaws and thorns in our flesh.

When people ask, “How are you?” we tend to be up front and honest about our health concerns and difficulties and so on. But we should not stop there. In our text, Paul advocates that we do some more boasting, a little more bragging. The question is, ‘what is it that we boast about?’

It’s a supernatural kind of boasting. It’s not a boasting about ourselves, about all the good things we feel we have done. Instead, it’s a boasting of the Lord who helps amidst our limitations and shows His strength especially when we are weak. We boast in the God who saved us by His sheer mercy and died for our sins. We have nothing to offer except our sins.

The world is very good at boasting. We are encouraged to boast all the time. The problem is this boasting is self-focused. First John 2 says, “Everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world.” This is self-righteousness. Boasting about ourselves and our accomplishments only obscures the Lord who is the Master and Creator of all things. We could do nothing without Him who gives us the ability. Our very life comes from Him and is in His hands and He alone deserves all the glory.

We live in a material world. People obsess about toys and gadgets and fine cars and big homes. It’s as though life is one big competition. We are told we must keep up with the Joneses and the one who dies with the most toys wins.

This kind of thinking only leads us away from God and obscures our need for Him. As James 4 says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” St. Paul says in our text, “I will boast more gladly of my weaknesses”. Not that Paul enjoys pain as though he is some sort of masochist; rather, he says “so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

Friends, our Lord knows our weaknesses, our struggles and difficulties. He invites us to look up to Him for grace. He does not leave us alone to struggle but He will give us the strength to endure and persevere and He will eventually remove the thorns in His perfect time.

Paul encourages us to boast of our weaknesses so that we may depend on God’s power. The times when we feel weak and vulnerable and afflicted and tempted to sin are the best opportunities to experience God’s grace.

Let's imagine what life would be like if things were always smooth sailing...What if we had all the money we could possibly spend, our health was perfect, and our work-life was easy? Would we be close to God or would we tend to forget Him? I think the latter. The instinct of our sinful nature is to be independent from God, to take credit for things and say, "I'm a self-made man". It is only when we are pushed to our limits that we begin to cry out for help.

Christ says to you as He said to Paul, "My strength is made perfect in weakness". When we are tested He gives us His strength to endure. He allows trials to come our way not because He has forgotten us. Rather, He uses adversities of many kinds so that we might draw closer to Him and look to Him for grace and help in our time of need.

Friends, faith is like a muscle. It needs to get exercise or it will get weak; "use it or lose it" as they say. Sometimes as Christians we act more like spiritual couch potatoes. But God is good and He wants us to know the fullness of life and the grace we have in Christ. And so He allows trials to come our way so we might exercise that muscle of faith and be moved to find strength in Him. The times when the chips are down and things seem stacked against us are when we see our need for help most clearly and we most earnestly turn to God. And in the end, this is the most important thing. God will deliver us in His perfect time. It is not His will for these horrible things in the world to continue but it is what He is willing to use in a broken world to bring us closer to Him.

By the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and His resurrection He has redeemed His creation and when He returns He will make all things new. This will be the ultimate deliverance when life will truly reign and sickness, death, sin, trial and temptation will be things of the past.

This is the message the world desperately needs to hear. And as Jesus sent out His disciples to preach the Good News of the Kingdom He sends His church today. We have this same mission. Can we do it on our own? No way Jose! But with God all things are possible. When we don't know what to say to our neighbours who don't know Christ, when we feel weak and unequipped, the Lord is with us; we can rest in His strength. He will direct us. He simply asks that we look to Him; He hears our prayers and He will guide us every step of the way.

If you feel weak or inexperienced it can be a good sign. It means that we can find all our strength in the Lord. And He will surely give it.

We have the power of Almighty God our side; the God who made us, who redeemed us by dying for us, and who sanctified us and made us His own in the waters of Holy Baptism, and who abides and nourishes us in Holy Communion. The strength and grace of the Almighty and merciful Lord go with you. Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ. Amen.