

The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
July 5, 2009
Year B, Proper 9

The Power of Weakness

II Corinthians 12:2-10: The Thorn of the Flesh: “My power is made perfect in weakness”:

1. **The Thorn of the Flesh:** I looked over numerous texts, and it is clear that no one really knew from what affliction Paul suffered. Some thoughts were:
 - a. Persecution:
 - i. Physical:
 1. Put in Stockades
 2. Flogged 5 times with 39 lashes
 3. Beaten with rods 3 times
 4. Stoned one time
 5. Shipwrecked 3 times, once being adrift overnight before being rescued
 - ii. Psychological: The frustration at having his teachings being:
 1. misunderstood
 2. challenged
 3. misapplied
 - b. Physical:
 - i. Epilepsy
 - ii. Malaria
 - iii. Ophthalmia: inflammation of the mucous membrane lining of the eyelid and the exposed surface of the eye.
 - c. Psychological:
 - i. Concupiscence: A strong sexual desire.
 - ii. Personality: driven; type A
 - iii. Pride:
 1. He was telling people, due to the theophany at his conversion, that he was an apostle even though never having met Christ.
 2. He at first tried to impress by his Jewish heritage: circumcised when 8 days old, could trace his heritage, no Gentile blood, given a sophisticated education under Gamaliel, adhered to the law rigidly.
 3. When others did not respond well to that, he bragged about his sufferings.
 4. When challenged, he could be sarcastic, manipulative and bullying. He would anger churches whom he hoped to soothe. He would exaggerate the truth or reshape it.
2. **What is the thorn of the flesh for us?**

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- a. *Pride*: Flaunt it: our house, our lawn, our job, our college, our vacation, our clothes, our car --- anything that makes us appear better than others, that enables us to wear a mask that hides our insecurity.
 - b. *Envy*: Want it: Someone has
 - i. a prettier wife,
 - ii. a bigger house,
 - iii. a lower golf score,
 - iv. more money,
 - v. is more handsome,
 - vi. ages more gracefully and/or with less health issues.
 - c. *Illness*:
 - i. Bad back,
 - ii. arthritis,
 - iii. knee surgeries that eliminate jogging,
 - iv. cancer that requires operations-chemotherapy-radiation that lead to weakness, vomiting, hair loss
 - v. heart attack that limits how much one can exert themselves
 - vi. needing a transplant or facing a painful death
3. **What gives us Peace?**
- a. *Understanding the Meaning of Life*:
 - i. Not money, fame or power,
 - ii. But learning how to love and be loved, by understanding that the only thing going with you from this life to the next is who you have chosen to become by how you relate to everyone you meet on everyday of your life.
 - iii. Nothing can take our eternal happiness away from us --- no earthquake, no war, and no illness --- just our own behavior through our own choices.
 - b. *Kiss of Peace*: not a neighborly *howdy*, but a recognition that eternal happiness is ours for the taking. It's up to how we live. There is nothing to really worry about.
 - c. *Result*: That is why we can bravely suffer from illness and die. That is why we are not consumed with envy or proudly putting others down --- because we are up --- eternally.
 - d. *Power*: When you remain calm amidst turmoil, and do not lose your faith amidst illness and impending death, you move mountains among atheists, agnostics, and those who have fallen away from the faith of their youth. Ironic that when your body is at its weakest, your psychological and spiritual influence is at its most powerful. People watch the ill and dying, they watch how we suffer the loss of our job or house, they watch for us to despair and to fall away from our belief in God. Not doing that confounds them, making them wish they had whatever we have to get us through those problems. You then spark their renewed journey toward faith, growth and happiness.
4. **Paul's Life of Suffering:**

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- a. Appearance:
 - i. He himself in II Corinthians 10:10 says that his adversaries said that he was “weak in presence and unimpressive in speech”.
 - ii. A later text said that he was “short, fat, bald, bowlegged, with a big hook nose” – not quite what we imagine, especially upon seeing regal statues of him holding a sword.
- b. Birth:
 - i. He was born with the name of Saul close to the year 10 AD in the town of Tarsus, a city on the southeastern corner of Asia Minor (today’s Turkey) of Jewish parents who traced their ancestry to the Tribe of Benjamin.
 - ii. As Tarsus had been made the capital of the Roman Province of Cilicia by Pompey, Paul’s father and thus Paul were Roman citizens, meaning that they had certain rights (a trial by the emperor if demanded, and a swift death vs. crucifixion).
- c. Rabbinical Studies:
 - i. He studied to be a rabbi first at the synagogue in Tarsus within what he described as “the strictest party of our religion”, but then in the year 30 in Jerusalem under the esteemed Rabbi Gamaliel for 3 or 4 years.
 - ii. While a requirement to be a rabbi was to be married, there is no evidence that had occurred when Paul burst on the scene of the martyrdom of St. Stephen (36AD), guarding the cloaks of those who then have their arms free to throw the heavy stones that will kill Stephen.
- d. Conversion:
 - i. At one point, Saul is sent with soldiers to Damascus to arrest Christians. He traveled north through Judea, and then Samaria, most probably going through Nazareth. Then on to Capernaum and gradually to Damascus. The date is uncertain, believed to be circa 36 AD.
 - ii. About 2 miles outside the city, Christ appears to him in a blinding light, knocking him off his horse and saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Paul asks who is speaking and is told “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.”
- e. Meditation:
 - i. His blindness was healed by Ananias who came to baptize him, but Paul had to then make sense of what happened to him.
 - ii. He traveled to Arabia to Mt. Sinai, and after a period of meditation returned to Damascus in 37 AD, preaching about Christ until the year 40 AD when he traveled to Jerusalem to meet the apostles. He so alienated the Jewish population that he had to secretly escape by being lowered over the wall in a basket, showing how small he must have been.
- f. Alienation:

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- i. His immediate conversion was so striking that he was not welcomed by either Jews or Christians, the former feeling betrayed and the latter scared.
 - ii. The apostles gave him such a wide berth that Paul then went back to Tarsus for 4 years (40-44 AD), working as a tent maker.
 - iii. He was rescued by Barnabas (originally a Jew from Cyprus, who, after being a Christian, was sent to oversee Antioch), who brought him to Antioch in Syria as his assistant and a church teacher.
 - iv. Both he and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to bring a donation, as Christians in Jerusalem were ostracized and not given jobs, making the procurement of food, clothing and shelter very difficult. This time, his reception was a little more cordial, comparing notes on his preaching with James and Peter.
- g. *Missionary Journeys:*
- i. *Mission I (46-49 AD; 1,400 miles):* He returned to Antioch where the local church commissioned his first missionary journey with Barnabas, laying hands on both. They traveled to Cyprus and then throughout southern central and eastern Asia Minor (Perga [where Mark deserts him], Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe).
 1. He met with opposition in each town, and even the fledgling new churches made up of Jewish and Gentile members had growing resistance from their Jewish friends.
 2. This opposition was strong enough to scare John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, and the future author of the 2nd Gospel, making him flee back to Antioch to avoid harm.
 - a. Apparently, upon arriving in Attalia in southern Asia Minor, they soon encountered many robbers in the mountains outside the city.
 - b. This so upset Paul that he refused to allow John Mark to accompany them on the 2nd journey; in turn, Barnabas, angered by Paul's anger at his cousin, refused to accompany Paul.
 3. The anger of Jewish Christians against Pagan Christians brought up issues such as whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised, to observe Jewish dietary laws, as well as all of Mosaic Law.
 4. All of this culminated in the famous Council of Jerusalem in 49 AD which, due to the voice of Peter supporting Paul, began to free the Gentile converts from Jewish laws, the test issue being circumcision.
 5. However, after the Council of Jerusalem came "The Antioch Incident", where Peter, under pressure from the influence of James in Jerusalem, stopped eating with Gentiles, making Paul furious who "opposed him to his face" for "not walking straight according to the truth of the Gospel". Peter would later have a dream where Jesus asked

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him to eat the meat from all animals, pure and impure, which made Peter see the error of his ways.

- ii. [Mission II \(49-52 AD; 2,800 miles\)](#): This was again through Asia Minor, now even the west coast to Ephesus (50 AD), and then for the first time to Greece (Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth).
 1. Here Paul took two others as his assistants: Timothy and Luke (the author of the 3rd gospel).
 2. Paul was imprisoned and flogged in Philippi because he exorcised a slave girl whose rantings had brought her owner a lucrative income.
 3. He was then evicted from Thessalonica.
 4. He lived in Corinth for 18 months (50-52 AD) where he founded a strong and vibrant Gentile church.
 5. After returning to Jerusalem to report his progress, he went to Antioch to rest from 52-54 AD.
- iii. [Mission III \(54-57 AD\)](#): This was essentially a repeat of the 2nd trip to most of the same cities of Asia Minor and Greece).
 1. Ephesus: He made this capital of Asia the center of his operations, staying quite a while in Ephesus itself, it being noted that he lectured in the hall of Tyrannus for two years.
 2. He was imprisoned in Ephesus, from which he wrote to the Galatian and Philippian Churches and 4 letters (only 2 survive) to the Corinthian Church.
 3. Upon release from prison, his preaching angered a man named Demetrius, who sold statues/images of the Temple of Artemis. Demetrius gathered a mob to kill Paul, who wisely fled the city.
 4. During his 3-month stay in Achaia (where Corinth is), he wrote his letter to the Romans.
- iv. [Visit to Jerusalem \(58 AD\)](#):
 1. Paul went to Jerusalem to bring donations for the poor.
 2. However, James, realizing how angry the Jewish citizenry would become, counseled Paul to join 4 men who were going through the ceremony of the Nazirite vow and to pay for their expenses.
 3. Paul did, but towards the end of the 7-day ceremony, Paul was recognized and accused of violating the Mosaic Law by bringing a Gentile into the temple. They dragged him from the temple and tried to kill him, but he was rescued by the Roman tribune Lysias stationed at the Fortress Antonia.
- v. [Imprisonment in Caesarea](#): Fearing the Jewish reaction, Paul was moved to Caesarea Maritima to the Procurator of Judea, Antonius Felix, who kept Paul in prison for 2 years (58-60 AD).

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- vi. [Appeal to Caesar \(60 AD\)](#): When the new procurator, Porcius Festus, arrived in 60 AD, Paul demanded his right as a Roman citizen for an appeal for a trial in Rome.
- vii. [Journey to Rome \(60-61 AD\)](#): The sea voyage was compromised by a northeaster storm that carried the boat for days until it finally was shipwrecked off the coast of Malta (island south of Sicily). After spending the winter there, Paul was sailed to Syracuse and gradually made his way to Rome, arriving in the spring of 61 AD.
- viii. [House Arrest \(61-63 AD\)](#): He was then kept in house arrest, from which he wrote the Captivity Letters (Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians).
- ix. [Spain](#): He was eventually found not guilty, and traveled to Spain, Clement of Rome attesting to that.
- x. [Second Roman Arrest & Death](#): He was later accused of another crime, and during the persecutions of Nero put to death in 67 AD, this being beheaded due to being a Roman citizen. The place was known as “The Three Fountains” for fountains sprung up in the 3 places where Paul’s head bounced after the decapitation. He is buried at that spot where there is now the Church of St. Paul Outside the Walls, this being en route out of the city towards the seaport of Ostia.

Mark 6:1-6: “And he marveled because of their unbelief”:

The Rev. Peter K. Stimpson