

Meditation "Strength and Weakness"

Sunday, July 7, 2024

Scripture Readings: II Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10, Mark 6:1-13

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Our first scripture reading is II Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10. The Old Testament lectionary readings this summer have traced ancient Israel's transition from tribal confederation to monarchy. Following the death of King Saul, David is anointed shepherd king of Israel. David, the shepherd boy, who used faith and unconventional means to conquer Goliath, is the one God chose to become a charismatic, political leader uniting the northern and southern kingdoms. Hear now the Holy Word of God.

Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, "Look, we are your bone and flesh. ² For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel." ³ So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel. ⁴ David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. ⁵ At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.

⁹ David occupied the stronghold and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inward. ¹⁰ And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Mark 6:1-13. The gospel lectionary combines the story of Jesus' rejection in his hometown of Nazareth with the ordaining and sending of the twelve for a mission that will also meet rejection. The Apostle Paul will later affirm in II Corinthians 12:9-10 that he is *content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ; for Christ's grace is sufficient and Christ's power is made perfect in our weakness. Whenever I am weak, then I am strong.* Hear now God's Holy word.

Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ² On the sabbath Jesus began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. ⁴ Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." ⁵ And Jesus could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶ And Jesus was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷ Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹ but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹ If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³ They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Strength and Weakness

Text: "Therefore I am content with weaknesses... for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. II Corinthians 12:10

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, make us mindful of your strength in times of weakness. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Being at the General Assembly this past week brought back memories of previous assemblies I attended on my journey as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

My first was as an observer in 1988, the 200th General Assembly which met in St. Louis. I was working on my Doctor of Ministry degree serving as an associate pastor in Belleville, IL. I remember it as a celebratory time singing the Bicentennial hymn, "Come Sing, O Church, in Joy," amidst addressing new polity following the reunification of the northern and southern presbyterian churches in 1983. I was grateful to be in a denomination which welcomed my ordained ministry as a woman.

Six years later in 1994 (three decades ago), I served as a commissioner at the 206th General Assembly in Wichita, KS. I was newly married, moving into our first home, and interviewing for a new position as associate pastor at Webster Groves Presbyterian Church. During my time in Wichita, I suspected I was pregnant and upon my return, a test confirmed it. It was a time of great personal joy for Peter and me; nonetheless, I was mindful of the ongoing struggle for equality and justice on behalf of others within our denomination and society.

Twenty years later in 2014 (one decade ago), a year following my call to serve as Westminster's 18th Senior Minister and Head of Staff, I have a powerful memory of being an observer at the 223rd General Assembly in Detroit, MI and being present for the vote that paved the way for sessions of congregations to approve weddings for same gender couples and pastors to officiate at their weddings. I stood a few rows behind Westminster's former Associate Pastor, the Reverend Mark Merrill, on this momentous and joyous occasion and returned to officiate at the marriage of Elder Mary Ray and Karen Dillard following our Session's overwhelming affirmation.

Returning this year as a member of the Committee of the Office of the General Assembly, I was privileged to be a part of the leadership overseeing this General Assembly. As we continue to be a welcoming and affirming denomination amid many fundamental and evangelical churches misrepresenting scripture with literal and unfounded interpretations about gender identity and sexual orientation, I am grateful for the gift of our church's voice and its hermeneutical interpretation of scripture, even as I recognize both the strength and weakness within our denomination. The strength of trusting God's spirit to work within a democratic process through the voice of commissioners elected from presbyteries across the country is accompanied with the weakness of long, and at times, convoluted and tedious meetings. We are indeed a denomination reformed and always reforming.

The Old Testament lectionary readings this summer trace ancient Israel's transition from tribal confederation to monarchy and we are introduced to the strength and weakness of both kings and kingship. In Samuel's surprising anointing of Jesse's youngest son, David, we learn that God's criteria for choosing a leader are different from the world's. God chose David because of his heart, ingenuity and courage rather than his physical size or strength. As the story of David's kingship unfolds, we celebrate the strength of his heart, and we also will witness how David's strength becomes his weakness.

Often a strength can become a weakness, and vice versa, a weakness can become a strength. In Chinese philosophy, yin and yang (e.g., dark and light) are described as complementary opposites within a greater whole. There is a fine line between one's strength and one's weakness. For instance, the strength of perfectionism can become the weakness of obsession and compulsion. The strength of confidence can become the weakness of arrogance. The strength of compassion can become the weakness of over-indulgence. The strength of humility can become the weakness of timidity. The strength of individualism can become the weakness of self-centeredness.

The paradox of faith is that strength is found in our weakness. By embracing our humanity in the incarnation, Christ reminds us that our vulnerability and frailty are a source of strength, not weakness. Living out our faith as God's children gives us insight into our weaknesses rather than projecting an image of human strength.

True weakness is refusing to acknowledge our humanity and our need for forgiveness and healing. It is that striving, that insistence on a closed, stubborn, self-sufficiency, a pride that demands we earn our place in the world, that is at the heart of our weakness. Salvation through faith is letting go of the illusion that one can save oneself, and no longer striving to do so.

Faith provides a reservoir of spiritual strength and health for each one of us as we navigate the unexpected in life. The strength of knowing who we are and to whom we belong is imperative when we confront insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities along the way. The strength of knowing who we are and to whom we belong sustains us, as it did Christ, when those closest to us or from our hometowns cannot celebrate who we become and who God calls us to be.

Paul speaks to this kind of strength in his letter to the Corinthians: “Whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” King David affirms this kind of strength in the psalms when he proclaimed, “The joy of the Lord is my strength.”

By the grace of God, may we find strength in our weakness, live into hope in the midst of despair, and discover inner peace in spite of our fears, and when the unexpected in life brings insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities, may we affirm with those who have come before us, “It is well with our soul.” Amen.