

“Traveling Light”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
FPCNC – July 4, 2021

Please Read:
II Cor. 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

The paradox of Paul’s astonishing assertion in our text from II Corinthians is that weakness is the path to ultimate strength. Today we celebrate our nation’s Independence Day, and as Americans we revel in the fact that we are the *land of the free and home of the brave*. We regularly describe ourselves as the greatest nation in the world, and in many ways we are, with a powerful economy and military. Although the quote does not come from Alexis De Toqueville’s classic *Democracy in America*, as is often cited, it is still a truism that “America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.” The question is, of course, what is the “good” we need, to truly be a “great” nation? Surely, one would think, it can’t have anything to do with *weakness*!

In his book *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Peter Gomes tells of going to England where he worshipped at the church in Windsor where the royal family worships. On this occasion following the service Peter met the Queen Mother, who at the time was 102. She commented to Peter on what a fine sermon the pastor gave, and then she said, with a twinkle in her eyes, “I do like a bit of good news on Sunday, don’t you?”

So, what’s the good news about weakness? In our gospel text today Jesus seems to reveal weakness of a sort. He shows up at his hometown and can’t do much for the folks there. They question his abilities. The fact there is no mention of Jesus’ father could also be a cut to his honor... Jesus, the bastard. What does he know? It seemed they were offended by him... Jesus replies that a prophet is not honored in his hometown, and Mark writes, “he could do no deed of power there.” Mark concludes that Jesus was amazed at their “unbelief.” Apparently, unbelief is to Jesus what kryptonite is to Superman. It makes him weak.

This year’s celebration of our nation’s independence is particularly important to many of us because of the scare we had on January 6th, a reminder that our democracy is fragile and needs to be constantly protected and nurtured. For me also this is the first time Kim and I have been able to celebrate our national holiday here in the United States for many years. And while we missed the fireworks last night, I love the way that Victoria has woven throughout the service today music that is particular to our nation’s history, from gospel classics to civil rights favorites, and even contemporary music by a local composer that honors our own ongoing part in the history-making of our country.

I also love “America the Beautiful,” and Katherine Bates’ lyrics, “O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain. For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain. America, America, God shed his grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.” But do you remember the second stanza? “America, America, God, mend thine every flaw...”

“God, mend thine every flaw.” It’s a prayer, really, and as we have so poignantly and painfully been reminded in recent months and years, we have deeper flaws than we care to admit. We have weaknesses that need to be acknowledged and mended. Our economic and military might is threatened by China and Russia. We struggle with growing inequalities with income and

educational opportunities. We are the most violent developed country in the world. We still struggle with racism, and bigotry toward the LGBTQ community. Women's fundamental right of self-determination is being challenged in the courts. As the 1619 Project and Critical Race Theory suggests, are we merely a product of white supremacy and colonial domination? Have we lost our moral compass, or did we even have one to begin with? We very much stand at a cross-roads about how we define what it means to be great. Are we confused about what it means to be good? Will our division, polarity and political fighting around justice and freedom issues break our nation?

... Just as we feel we can't bear it any longer, feeling stripped of our greatness and pride, we read Paul's disorienting words, "I boast of my weaknesses."

What does he mean by this? Paul was a very proud man on the one hand, having studied with the most elite teachers of the time. He achieved the highest status in the Jewish tradition and was a Roman citizen. I don't think he's trying to feign false humility. He would agree with Golda Meir's quote, "Don't act so humble. You're not that great!" Rather, Paul is saying that vulnerability (acknowledging our brokenness, sin and weakness spiritually) is an essential part of our faith that will lead to new life and ultimate power, the deeper magic C.S. Lewis describes in the Chronicles of Narnia...

We don't know what the thorn in Paul's flesh was all about, but it was something he had faith God could cure, but it lingered, even after relentless prayer. Instead of healing his wound, God gave Paul another answer: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." It's one of the great paradoxes of our faith: "When I am weak, then I am strong."

When I first arrived here to New Canaan, I shared with someone my favorite saying, that "I am a weak and ignorant man in the hands of a strong and wise God." The person scorned that as a lack of confidence. I laughed. It's not about having confidence, but about *the source* of my confidence.

Today, I invite you to consider the counter-cultural and counter-intuitive truth that acknowledging our weaknesses, our brokenness, our flaws, and admitting that we are vulnerable... This weakness is a pathway to God's grace and ultimate power.

I want to give a shout out to the men listening in from the Light House this morning, a residential recovery community for those struggling with addictions. I have such respect for those who have been broken by addiction and dependencies and have been brought to that place of reckoning and understanding that "I cannot fix myself. I cannot do this alone. I need help. And the help I need is found in compassionate and caring community."

Power is made perfect in weakness, the Scripture says. As a nation and as individuals, we find our inner authority, our spiritual center, only when we face our weaknesses together. Theology originates in pain, said the German theologian Dorothee Sölle.¹ Likewise, faith means daring to love; and faith originates not from loveless power, but from powerless love. That's why Jesus was always hanging out with weak people---those who were hurting and oppressed. His mission was to invite weak and wounded people, ordinary people, to enter the Kingdom, the Beloved

¹ Dorothee Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak*.

Community of love, and to experience forgiveness, justice, and restored life. But his starting point was weakness.

Even as Jesus was being rejected by his own people, he found some power in his weakness. He found that when he was weak, God's grace came pouring into him and through him. It seems to be that Mark patched two *non sequitur* texts together in our gospel lesson. But interestingly, just as Jesus is not strong by himself, he gives a teaching on what Christian community is all about and how we are called to be agents of transformation sent into the world *together*.

The second scene in our gospel lesson has Jesus sending his twelve disciples two by two to announce that the Kingdom is here—the God Movement is here, as Clarence Jordan called it. But if Jesus is the initiator, the catalyst, of the new Kingdom of God, it seems that he's choosing a rather weak way of getting the word out. Why send only 12, two at a time? "Take nothing with you--- no food, no money, no traveling bag." What a weak way to start a movement! He tells them to go to various houses. "If they don't welcome you, shake the dust off your feet and keep moving." In other words, your mission is an act of faith, and you will be given what you need when you need it. The transformation of the world will always happen one person at a time, one household at a time...

Summer is the time for taking trips. Our son Matthew just flew in from Paris yesterday. Some of you will be taking trips and packing is always a critical part of preparing for a journey. One of the things I learned as I started the 500-mile Camino Santiago was that the hostels where pilgrims stay at night are filled with all kinds of things left behind as pilgrims realize how heavy a backpack can feel when you are carrying it for eight hours in the hot sun! All kinds of articles of clothing, canteens, hats, shoes, bedding and rain gear that people realized was just dead weight are discarded along the way. I'm quite sure if you started out the Camino with no gear at all, after a week at the beginning, you could be quite well outfitted simply by picking up what had been discarded by prior pilgrims!

So the question I have for you, and for us as a church, for us as a nation: What are we carrying that we need to let go of as we continue our journey? What burdens of pride and ego are weighing us down? Jesus advised his disciples to go out with "nothing," not because he didn't think they would have needs, but that Jesus believed God would provide what they really needed.

I'm told that in some traditions when a minister or priest is ordained, the question asked is not "Are you strong enough to be a pastor," but "Are you weak enough to be a pastor? Are you weak enough to follow Jesus?" Mark Twain is said to have remarked, "It is not what I don't understand in the Bible that troubles me; it is what is perfectly clear that does." Jesus focused first on people who are weak. Jesus was in the business of transforming weakness into strength. The question for us is whether we will allow God to turn *our weakness* into *God's strength*.

As Leonard Cohen once sang, "Ring the bells that still can ring; Forget your perfect offering; There is a crack, a crack in everything; That's how the light gets in." That's how we become, in Henri Nouwen's term, "wounded healers." We allow our pain to widen our sensitivity to others; we allow our flaws to connect us to the suffering of others and to give us compassion.

Finally, at both the Rotary and Exchange clubs of which I am apart, we start our meetings with the pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. At first, coming from an international context, I was a little shy, but in fact the pledge can be read as a commitment to forming a more perfect union... “with liberty and justice for all.” And paradoxically, I believe it begins with remembering that as Christians our citizenship is with the Kingdom of God. We pledge our allegiance to a much Higher Power. Take a moment to look at the cross here as the focal point of our worship space, and how the table to which we will come in a moment is always in the shadow of that huge cross. It’s a sign of weakness and defeat, even death, on the one hand, but on the other, by God’s grace, a sign of strength, victory, and new life; even power over death.

So, friends, sisters and brothers, siblings in Christ, as we prepare our hearts to receive from this table and go to celebrate this day, I pray we will learn to travel light, to lay down our strengths and worldly power. Let’s empty our packs of carrying the heavy load of pride and ego. Let’s pick up our crosses, remembering we will travel farther if we embrace our weakness and vulnerability. Here, we pledge our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor, to the One who gave up everything to show *all people* the unsurpassed love of God. I trust that God is at work in us, in our church, in our nation, mending our every flaw. May we boast all the more gladly of our weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in us.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.