

THE SUPPLE SAIL OF FAITH

a sermon by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno for July 4, 2021
based on 2 Cor. 12:2-10

When I was about seven my best friend, Bill, flunked an eye test at school, so he prayed to God and, wow, when he went to a real optometrist, the fellow said his eyesite was 20x20. He was very grateful and very believing. A year later I noticed he was wearing glasses. We didn't discuss it.

If God were only a genie, we would ask for things all day long and it would be heaven. Or would it?

Well, according to today's text, once, long ago the apostle Paul approached God with a prayer about an ailment he was suffering. He called it a "thorn in the flesh." We don't have any idea what that amounted to. Maybe it was recurrent kidney stones, or a rotator cuff that made sleep difficult for him, or something even more serious like epilepsy. No one knows.

"Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me," he said, "and nothing . . ." It wouldn't go away. Paul wondered, what might this mean? What message from God might be hidden in the ailment?

"Just be content with the world as it is? Sometimes you're up, sometimes you're down?"

Or: "Suffering dignifies a person; borne patiently it will produce character in you. So, look within yourself and you'll come up with the strength to endure?"

These ideas are commendable, even Biblical, but they are not what Paul was talking about. The wisdom that Paul claims to have received is one that takes the focus off of himself and puts it onto what he is learning may be God's idea of power.

Paul says that in the depths of his heart he sensed God saying to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

This has to do with something Dan Rasmussen said to us last week during an announcement. Speaking for our Adult Ed committee Dan recommended we all read a book by Bruce Reyes-Chow, *In Defense of Kindness*.

Bruce, he told us, was once elected moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA). When a friend of Bruce's son asked what that meant, Bruce's son said, "My dad is a pretty big deal ... with a very small group of people."

That would describe the apostle Paul. Christianity in 50 AD when Paul was around was a fledgling society made up of a pretty scruffy lot. It was probably no bigger than all the Lion's Clubs in Oregon put together. Not exactly huge, but he was the biggest thing in it and to keep it from going to his head, he believed God tagged him with a chronic illness to bring him down. Maybe it was just an unsightly rash.

Whatever it was, it made him rethink the whole idea of what real power amounted to. And since he was a follower of a Palestinian peasant executed by the empire, he thought maybe real power was not very conventional.

Since he couldn't shake his troubles Paul chose to embrace them and redefine his life by taking them into full account, not denying them.

Instead of seeing his illness as an enemy, he decided to make it a friend. His Jesus, had suffered – even died. What then can we expect ourselves? Paul says as much in his first letter to the church to the Corinthian Christians.

1Cor. 2:1 When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. . . None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

Looking at this letter of Paul's closely it's easy to see that the Christians there were obviously making a royal mess of things, arguing amongst themselves, trying to out-manuever one another, dividing up into factions, lobbies, single-issue groups. They were forever trying to overpower one another.

"But hey," says Paul, "real power is found in weakness, in vulnerability, not manipulation. Your power plays aren't working for you. For goddsake, try something else, he says. The power of God is never evident in some muscular display of potency, but rather in Jesus suffering on a cross.

I grant you, this is very counter-intuitive, so let me offer you an illustration - a story that has made the rounds in martial arts circles for a number of years.

At his father's urging, a 10-year-old boy, a resident of Hawaii, decided to study judo despite the fact that he had lost his left arm in a devastating car accident. Well, look, a lot of us are drawn to things we may not seem, at first, to have an obvious affinity for.

The boy began lessons with an old Japanese judo master. Amazingly, he took to the sport immediately.

He was doing quite well, in fact, but he couldn't understand why because, after three months of training the master had taught him only one move.

"Sensei," the boy said, "Shouldn't I be learning more moves?" "Trust me," said his Sensei, "If you give yourself entirely to learning this particular move, that is, learn it in your bones, it might be the only move you'll ever need."

Not quite understanding, but finding no reason *not* to trust his teacher, the boy kept training. Several months later, the sensei took the boy to his first tournament. Surprising himself, the boy easily won his first two matches. The third match proved to be more difficult, but after some time, his opponent became impatient and charged. The boy deftly used his one move and won the match.

Amazed by his success, the boy found himself in the finals. This time, his opponent was bigger, stronger, and more experienced.

The boy appeared to be overmatched. Concerned that he might get hurt, the referee urged the boy's sensei to withdraw and take on a boy who'd lost earlier, instead.

"No," his sensei insisted, "Let him continue." The match resumed, his opponent made a critical mistake. Instantly, the boy used his move to put the opponent on his back.

The boy had won the match and, in fact, his age division.

On the way home, the boy and his sensei reviewed each match, each opponent. Then the boy summoned the courage to ask what was really on his mind.

"Sensei, how could I have won a tournament like this with only my one move?"

"You won for three reasons," the sensei answered. "First, you're naturally patient. You don't fall for the kind of traps usually laid for beginners. Secondly, you've nearly mastered one of the most difficult throws in all of the judo. And lastly, the only known defense for that move is for your opponent to grab your left wrist ... and you don't have one."

Weakness can, in fact, become an unbeatable strength.

The late Robert Bellah was a wonderful Sociologist with the University of California whom I became acquainted with when I lived in Berkeley decades ago.

He was a Christian and has written very provocatively about our national life, American culture & religion, and human behavior.

He wrote an article for the *Christian Century* shortly before our second disastrous war in Iraq began 18 years ago that he called, "Righteous Empire."

The U.S. has enormous power, more than any nation has ever had—probably more than is good for any nation to have. Power in itself is not bad. The question is what kind of power. Careful power is moderate and restrained, always thoughtful of consequences, always concerned that it nurture, not destroy.

The Christian tradition, he said, is rooted in the idea that God in Christ is the very exemplum of careful power. [Power that is restrained, weighs consequences and nurtures the world].

Something to consider on this July 4th weekend.

Many think of God, as Michelangelo painted him on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, muscular like Zeus, stretched out across the heavens. This is great art, but questionable theology.

The apostle Paul presents a very different idea of God and God's power in relation to human life. Michelangelo captured what Paul understands to be power in another work of art located outside the Sistine Chapel, near the entrance to St. Peter's.

It's much subtler, theologically, than the Sistine ceiling. It's his sculpture called the *Pieta* -- the lifeless body of Jesus cradled in the arms of his eternally young, beautiful, and serene mother.

Christ crucified, the power of God. It's NOT just a briefly dead, crucified "savior" on his way to resurrection. The sculpture says, "Hold on -- look at this. Do you know what pathos is? No, you don't. Take this in."

I don't know of a more powerful sculpture. But its power is subtle, not overstated. It's supremely a picture of love, and sacrifice, and strangely, of peace.

It's a picture of what the world will do with what it can't comprehend, and yet it transcends that completely.

In the midst of tragedy, in the valley of the shadow of death, Christians for two thousand years have instinctively held on to the cross of Christ, -- often they have done this literally.

Here's what I mean. When my mother was about to go in for surgery to repair an abdominal aneurysm, a caring Catholic priest gave her something -- not an example of divine potency, not a finely honed theological argument, not a creed

or confession, or a whole Book of Confessions, nor a verse from the 23rd Psalm.

No, he gave her a wooden crucifix; Christ crucified, the power of God that a person about to be opened up with a metal scalpel can understand; understand viscerally.

I'm speaking of a God who is lovingly present in life; in our lives; a God who knows what it means to be human, a God who knows what it is to hurt physically and spiritually; a God who knows what it means to laugh, experience joy and passion; a God who draws near to you and me. Who weeps our tears with us, and sometimes for us when we find ourselves even beyond the ability to do that.

So whatever personal conclusion we reach about what this life of ours ultimately means, Christianity claims one thing: God is in the middle of it.

In Jesus, God laid down his own life to demonstrate the lengths God will go to be with us. Yes, and that when the time comes for us to face the worst that can happen—

the loss of a job or a relationship
the loss of our health
the death of a loved one

the end of the world as we know it and love it

— when that time comes, we will not be abandoned.

Paul wondered about that very thing. Remember, he had this malady. As I intimated, some scholars think it might have been epilepsy. He asked to be healed of it three times. Nothing happened. Where was God when it came to prayer?

Well, prayer, real prayer, as someone has said, is “becoming weak toward God.” Anyone who has prayed long and hard in the face of something immovable comes to understand this. Paul certainly did..

On Good Friday, April 13, 1979 exactly one year to the day before he would be assassinated in his church while celebrating the sacrament of communion, Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, made the following plea in a sermon. I think about the mystery behind these words quite often. As I quote this please think of Paul's fruitless prayer for relief from his thorn:

God is not failing us when we don't feel God's presence. Let's give up this business of saying, "God doesn't give me what I pray for so I'm going to just stop praying". God exists, and God exists even more the farther you feel you are away from God. When you think God is farthest away and can't hear you, that's

exactly when God is closest to you.

We may not feel close to God in these days, the times being so difficult for so many, but Bishop Romero would tell us that God is still at work.

Consider the 48 year old Georgia man, Joe Johnson, who lost his son in Iraq and while that war there was still going on, he asked to go over there because he wanted revenge.

He was in the National Guard, so all he had to do was ask for the deployment. An interesting wrinkle in the story was that he was a former *Church Of God* missionary. His wife said, "Even if you go over there and kill every insurgent there it won't bring our son back."

But he'd made up his mind. Hate and personal pain made him go. He was there six months and said that looking at the thing close up changed his heart.

He found as all veterans have that it was not as simple as he had first thought; and for a number of reasons. He hadn't counted on falling in love with the children of Iraq, for one.

He hadn't thought about the thousands and thousands of innocent Iraqis who had died. He hadn't looked their family members in the eye.

One morning there he searched his heart and decided he hated no one anymore. At bottom he just wanted to go home. He said he just couldn't bring himself to take the chance of killing innocent people anymore.

Then he said the most amazing thing: He said, "It'd be like shooting my own son."

Think of the *Pieta*. You know, once Jesus gets into a person it's hard to get him out.

Jesus once said, "The meek shall inherit the earth." Now, that may be counter-intuitive, but, if you're paying attention to history, you'll see that the truth of that gets proved again and again over time.

Paul prayed and prayed and . . . nothing; just like when long ago I prayed for five years to be rid of Lyme disease before I turned a corner with it. The condition didn't change, but Paul changed, and I changed. It teaches you what prayer really is, and is not.

We become a little more like Christ and that is not a bad thing at all. Prayer, especially prayer with tears and trembling, is, at bottom, a process of becoming "weak toward God."

We probably won't get what we want. But we might get what we need.
"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made *perfect* in weakness."

"Perfect" the word in Greek is *teleos*. It means goal or end or ultimate purpose.

Like coal which is made into diamonds by exposure to extreme heat.

Or, better, like a sail in the wind which is made perfect by weakness.

You know, a sail that is made of plywood wouldn't be much of a sail. You could easily keep such a sail open, but what good would it be?

Or may it's like when you were three or four and you wanted more than anything to write your own name, and your mother took your little fist in her hand, and you found that to write with it, you had to make it weak in her hand.

"My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness."
Nothing less.

Amen.