

**Mark 6:1-13**  
**2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

**First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ**  
**July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009, 14<sup>th</sup> Sun. Ord. Time.**

### **The Power of Weakness**

Today's reading is part of a speech Paul begins in Chapter 10 in which he defends his ministry to his critics. He writes about false apostles, his own sufferings as an apostle, and about his visions and revelations. Some false apostles and false prophets claim to have experienced visions and use them to prove their superiority as Christians. The idea of visions is often used to show how God reveals Himself. Paul's critics are using visions to try to discredit him. So in Chapters 10-13 we find Paul's sharp defense of his ministry with his attack on other Christian preachers traveling through Corinth.

Paul is attacked by so-called "super apostles" on the grounds that he does not sufficiently demonstrate the powers of an apostle. They say he does not accomplish great deeds, does not receive marvelous experiences, and accomplishes no miracles. If he had these experiences, he should boast about them.

In response, Paul refuses to play their game of boasting about his accomplishments. But he does humor the Corinthians' desire for apostolic boasting by bragging about things which are mirror images of what they expect. Paul, instead, boasts about things which demonstrate his weakness and vulnerability!

As Paul prepares to open his heart and share a very private and personal experience, he expresses his reluctance by saying, "It is necessary to boast;

nothing is to be gained by it...” Paul believes God uses sharing of experiences to inspire others but does not want us to become spiritual exhibitionists. We take risks in sharing special and spiritual things which others treat as ordinary.

When Paul speaks of “a person in Christ,” he most likely refers to himself. The discussion of his vision makes little sense otherwise. Throughout this story, Paul tells of the vision and at the same time both distances himself from it, and refers to himself in the third person. When Paul comments twice “whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows,” he attributes both the cause of this experience and its proper understanding to God alone.

No one is sure why Paul tells of his vision in the third person, as though it had happened to someone else. It may be that it happened so long ago it is hard to believe it really happened to him. Or, it may be the experience was so intense he is reluctant to speak of it in first person. Experts agree Paul is talking about himself. Paul seems unsure whether what he saw is the result of his body’s being transported to another place or whether God shows him what He did through the processes of the mind. One thing Paul is sure of, is that he has been in the very presence of God.

Paul then moves from boasting about visions to boasting about great deeds. To prevent him from becoming too excited about his own achievements, God gives him “a thorn,” “a messenger from Satan.” Whatever particular difficulty this thorn might be is considered by some to be unimportant, because the question is whether Paul can succeed over it or persuade God to

do so on his behalf. Paul relates there are three occasions on which he prays for relief and his request is denied.

The fact that Paul tells of the thorn in the flesh right after his account of his vision of God is not accidental, because he feels these two experiences are related to each other. Paul seems to believe the thorn is given to him to prevent him from being overly proud of the exceptional character of the revelations he receives. Paul seems to indicate it is not necessary for him to explain what the “thorn” is either because the Corinthians may already know or it is not important to the point he is making.

There has been much guessing about the nature of this thorn. Many Protestant interpreters tend to think of it as some physical problem such as epilepsy, malaria, tuberculosis, weak eyes, or similar. Many Catholics think it is mental or spiritual in nature, possibly a nagging doubt or a persistent temptation. Still others think it is his constant exposure to nagging criticism or to persecution. Only one thing is certain – we really do not know!

Paul clearly states that he gives himself to earnest and repeated prayer that the thorn might depart. Instead of removing the thorn, God gives the reassurance of His grace and reminds Paul that his strength is made perfect in weakness. Paul never comes to feel that the thorn in itself is a good thing. Instead, he believes it is a messenger of Satan. But Paul comes to the place in his life where he sees how God’s grace can transform what is bad into something good in his life.

From experience, Paul learns that God can take our weaknesses and use them to demonstrate His power. Paul affirms there is nothing which can happen to one of God's children that, if we come to Him with it, He is able to take us from where we are and begin working some good. God does not build a wall around us to isolate us from the risk of harm. But God does surround us with a grace which enables us to transform anything which happens to us.

The closing lines of this passage contain themes which are familiar. Paul does not need a miraculous solution of his difficulty, whatever its nature, because the Lord says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." This is not a glorification of weakness as such or for its own sake, but because in weakness the power of Christ dwells in Paul. Paul's very weakness is transformed into strength.

Paul sees an important relationship between himself and the Corinthian congregation. In these words, the understanding of that relationship becomes clear. Paul, like the Corinthians and all believers, including us, experiences the life of Christ in his own person. Because of the deep and abiding connection between the apostle and Jesus Christ, Paul is able to see his own weaknesses as instances in which the strength of the gospel can be made known.

May we, like Paul, see the relationship between ourselves and Christ in our everyday lives. God wants us to understand that He will use the weaknesses each of us has in our own lives to turn them into something good which He will use in spreading His gospel message through us. Even though it may

sound a little strange at first, God wants us to trust that He will speak through us, through our actions, thoughts, and deeds, whenever we reach out to others. May we have faith and trust in God to allow Him to use our weaknesses in giving us opportunities to grow in strength through Him as we follow Him daily and accept His encouragement to obey Him and to do His will. It is only through God we will turn our weakness into power as we grow in love and in a closer relationship with each other and with God. Amen.