

SERMON JULY 7 2024 “When I am Weak, He is Strong”

Dear fellow redeemed of, by, and for Christ Jesus, last week in our Gospel lesson, Jesus had just raised a little girl from death to life and healed a woman who had suffered from a bleeding problem for twelve long years.

Today, Mark tells us that Jesus went home. Perhaps because He wanted to do for the citizens of Nazareth what He was doing for so many. Jesus wanted to be merciful to all people, which included His family, friends, his homies.

But the folks in Nazareth did not want Him or His gifts. They were offended by Him and His preaching. And so we hear those sad words: **He could do no mighty work there.**

Not because He didn't have the power, He most certainly did. He didn't do any because they didn't have the faith to receive the gifts Jesus had come to bring.

It is commonly assumed this was because they knew Jesus when He was “knee high to a grasshopper.” His family members were probably in the synagogue that very day. And they remembered when He helped His father in the carpentry shop.

So, who is He to teach us about God? Who does He think He is? The English says, **they took offense at Him.** The Greek says they were ***scandalized by Him.***

But *knowing* Jesus is only part of the reason they rejected Him. I think they were even more scandalized by ***what He said***.

For if Jesus had just been like some of the guys we see on TV these days, if He had just preached about those nasty Romans, or told them how to have health and wealth, or even better “ya’ll are doing okay, keep up the good work! ***then all would have been well***.

They probably would have loved the fact that a local boy had made good. Instead, Jesus said: **The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.**

**Repent.** Ah, there’s the rub! Nobody likes to be told that. Preach against others sin **and you go, Jesus!** Preach against us and . . . um . . . **you can go, Jesus!**

That’s still a danger for you and me, Jesus’ homies, His brothers and sisters through baptism today.

If I stand here and preach against all those horrible people *out there* and their unspeakable sins, how *they* need to repent and change, you’re thinking, *you go, Pastor!*

But if I preach about *your* sins, *your* unbelief, *your* unholy living, your pet sin, how do you respond?

I had a person in my church in New Mexico who would say, when I preached about certain sins: *Don’t go there, Pastor!* I

thought to myself, Why? Is that sacred ground? Did I talk about your pet sin today? Is there something you love more than God?

Is it something that you know is wrong, but you really don't want to give up? Besides, everyone is doing it, it's not hurting anyone . . . No, we don't like to be told to repent, either.

***But we must.*** For whether you know it, feel it or acknowledge it or not, your sin is killing you.

And your Father in heaven cares about you too much not to tell you that. ***Thus, saith the Lord must be proclaimed, as God told Ezekiel, whether they hear or refuse to hear.***

It's not easy to repent, it's kind of like dying - killing our pride, our self-esteem, our high opinion of ourselves - and none of us wants to die. But Jesus promises resurrection, forgiveness, and new life for those who the Spirit enables to repent.

On the other hand, Jesus doesn't preach repentance and then leave you in your sin, struggling for a way out of your guilt, shame, hurt, and despair.

Jesus came to be that way out for you. To die and rise for you. To give hope and healing, forgiveness, and new life to you. To give you what you need the most. That's why He went to His hometown that day, and why He's here for you today.

And Jesus sent His twelve out to preach the very same message. **They went out and proclaimed that people should**

**repent.** They went out with nothing - **no bread, no bag, no money, and only one piece of clothing.**

They went out, relying solely on the promise that God would provide. It could not have been easy to do so, especially since Jesus warned them that there would be those who would reject them, take offense at them, and be scandalized because of them—that what happened to Jesus would happen to them.

You know how that is too. You have family, friends, and neighbors, some who are unbelievers, other of whom believe differently than you do.

When you try to speak the truth in love to them, all you get is grief. They laugh and scoff at you. They accuse you of being a hypocritical or one of those Jesus Freaks.

All because you want to share the Good news of your Saviors love with those who mean the most to you.

Because you want them to share your joy.

Because you want them to receive God's gifts.

That's all you want. And it hurts to be rejected, doesn't it? Ezekiel knew it, Jesus knew it, and the twelve knew it.

***At just such times, you may feel like a failure. You may feel weak and vulnerable.***

Well I say to you, don't be afraid to be weak. And don't underestimate the power of weakness. (Now that's an oxymoron, isn't it? The *power of weakness!*)

But that my friends, is the theology of the cross.

It's what St. Paul was speaking of today in the Epistle when he said, **when I am weak, then I am strong.**

We don't usually think of Paul as weak - he's the world's greatest missionary after all! He went all over the place fearlessly proclaiming the Gospel and starting new churches!

But that's not quite the reality. Truth is, Paul was quite weak. He tells the Corinthians that **"I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling."**

And we heard today about his **"thorn in the flesh.** We're never told what that is, but whatever it was, it was given **to keep him from becoming conceited.**

To keep him humble and weak, relying not on himself or his own power, but on Christ and His power. Which is true power. **Power that is made perfect in weakness.**

Now, Paul didn't like the thorn, he didn't want to be weak. And so he prayed over and over that God take it away. ***Really, God, I can do more without it! I'll do better, I'll preach better without it.. I'll be a better missionary if you just take it away.***

Have you ever thought, felt, or prayed like that? Lord if you'll just do this or do that or give this or take away that, I'll be much better! You'll see.

I have. But God said, **Nope!** *I do understand. More than you know. **You need this Paul. You're afraid to be weak but you need to be weak.***

For strength can be an idol, too. And **God's power is made perfect in weakness.**

Exhibit 1 is Jesus, who came down from heaven to save us, leaving His throne for a manger. God became man.

The rich became poor. The almighty became weak. The innocent, son of God died to pay the wages of your sins

Jesus' rejection in His hometown foreshadows His rejection that led to the cross. His sacrifice there, so that . . . what?

That His weakness be strength for you. His death be life for you. His humility be exaltation for you. His condemnation be forgiveness for you.

And in His resurrection, all this is yours. That **when you are weak, in Christ, you may be strong.**

Now notice what those words say: **when you are weak, then you are strong.** God doesn't say that you'll ever stop being weak - but that *when* you are weak, you will be strong, with the strength of Christ.

The strength to love, forgive, serve, and lay down your life for others. To be like Christ.

For as we prayed in the Collect of the Day earlier: **O God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy.** Yes, that is true strength.

It's not easy. Paul didn't want a thorn; neither do we want to take up our cross and follow Jesus. It might lead to times of rejection, like when Jesus went home to Nazareth.

But just as we should not underestimate the power of weakness, so also do not underestimate the power of God's Word. Maybe it just needs to percolate for a while.

The Word does its work. Just as it does here, for you. The Word that in the beginning created everything that is, and now creates children of God in Holy Baptism.

The Word that brings us low and calls us to repentance, then raises us up in the forgiveness of sins. The Word that transforms ordinary bread and wine into the medicine of immortality.

Yes, God's chosen means of grace look very weak. But here is the powerful weakness of God for you and for all.

If God had come in His awesome power, we sinners would not be able to come and receive Him. We'd be like Adam and Eve, trying to hide from God.

But hidden in weakness He comes, that the Spirit might repent us and we may come into Jesus' presence without fear.

Hidden in weakness, Jesus comes for you. And **His grace is sufficient for you**. For your weakness, hurts, struggles, brokenness, disappointments, rejection, sin, shame, and death.

He took it all to the cross that you may live in the strength and freedom of His unfaltering love and forgiveness.

So when you are weak, when you think you can't go on, when you seem like a failure, when you are burdened by sin and guilt, when your enemies, sin, death and the world seem too much for you - come and receive the powerful grace and gifts of your Lord Jesus—His forgiveness and life, His Spirit and His salvation - that are exactly what you need.

And then go out into the world in His strength, not your own.

Go in His strength, in His powerful weakness, as His gift to others. Go, even if you still have thorns in your flesh.

Still weak, yes. Still afraid, perhaps. But knowing this: that you do not go alone, but that Christ lives in you. And when Christ lives in you, **when you are weak, then He is strong. AMEN**