

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Strength in Weakness"
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Life truths often amaze us as we hear what God says to us. Throughout the Bible, we are encouraged to keep our eyes open and ears clear. So when God teaches us that we only get to keep what we give away, from the perspective of eternity, we need to heed what we hear. And similarly when Jesus teaches us that our true strength can only be found by acknowledging our weakness and sin, then we should continue to listen.

It's easy to pretend that we are strong and faultless. Some may even put on a sinless façade, but not for long, and not in God's eyes.

All of us know something of our brokenness and neediness. The only question then is to what degree we will be able to be vulnerable and courageous enough to face our faults and sins. It's not fun or even comfortable to chart these waters of the dark side of our lives. But over and over in the Scripture, God indicates that the way to true Christian maturity can only be achieved through such a navigation.

Is there some hidden sin in your life that you cannot overcome? Is there something over which only God can achieve the victory? The place of our worst sins and faults is usually the place that God makes Himself best known. It is there we need God most. The experiences of God in these places are the greatest treasures we have in this life.

We don't know too much about either of the two guys Jesus described going to church (synagogue) one day. We do know one was well educated, thoroughly instructed in the Bible and knew thousands of rules which defined what being a good religious person meant in those days. All we know about the other was that he was a collaborator with the corrupt occupational government of the time. He most likely was on the take at work, and was ostracized by friends and family.

We do not know what his self esteem level was, and the Lord didn't find it important enough to record. What we do know was that he was needy, and desperate enough to meet with God in God's building. So he went to the morning service. And according to Jesus, he found grace and justification.

Justification is that word of forgiveness which means “forgiven just as if I had never sinned.” Nothing is better than this, the sense of freedom and peace one experiences when we give our lives to God through Jesus, and know for sure we have received eternal life. If you don't know for certain that you are going to heaven, ask me or someone here you trust, so that you can receive that assurance.

Apparently telling God and ourselves the truth about our sin and brokenness and asking God for mercy and transformation goes a lot further than looking around at people in church and saying that we are as good as, or better than they are. Jesus in fact warns us throughout this parable about too much self-confidence and judgmental attitude toward others, even though we might do many good things. Even though we might in fact be doing more righteous activities than others, nevertheless, Jesus warns us. He reminds us to look to the Lord and not at those around us for the standard of our behavior.

Acknowledging our weaknesses brings us onto the path of strength. It is in our expression of neediness and confession of sin where we find healing. Some believe asking for help is a sign of weakness, when in fact, asking for help is a sign of strength.

Paul, at the end of his ministry, as recorded in 2 Timothy 4, clearly thanks the Lord for all that God has done for him. He uses expressions that a prize fighter or a long distance runner might use. He's made it to the last round of boxing and sees the finish tape ahead of him. He is forgiving those who deserted him earlier when he began his ministry. (v. 16) He is encouraging and complementing the man whom he had rejected earlier in his ministry as unreliable, Mark, in verse 11. He is reflecting on how God had given him strength to hang in there. And more than just hanging in there, he was full of thanksgiving for what God had done, even as he was looking at the strong possibility of his own execution, which is the reference to being poured out as a libation or drink offering, such as was put on the altar in the Old Testament.

God brought him through much: imprisonment (from where he is currently writing Timothy), tortured for his faith. Let me read from 2 Corinthians 11:
11:25

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea;
11:26

on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters;

11:27

in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

11:28

And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.

11:29

Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant?

11:30

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

So we see Paul went through much more than you and I in service to the Lord. Yet he was not ashamed of these things, but even dares to say "For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10c)

Such weakness shows a strong relationship with God that undergirds every difficult challenge, every consuming issue. We can depend on God. The question is simply whether we will risk depending on God for our needs, wants and desires.

Today is Reformation Sunday. The Reformers were people who strongly trusted God. And the way I've read the history of this period indicates to me that they never saw themselves as starting a new church or a new movement. They were simply trying to be faithful to the Scriptures in the Church in which they were called and baptized and confirmed. Martin Luther didn't want to split the church. He wanted to come against things like indulgences which amounted to be paying money for salvation or spiritual favors. Calvin wanted to bring all of society into transformation by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Knox wanted to see his whole country come to know justification by faith alone, even though he had been a priest and notary.

The Reformers were simply attempting to be faithful to God. Nearly five hundred years later, there are hundreds more organized churches, denominations and Christian movements. Some have been very strong, some very weak. Our own Presbyterian Church is being debated as to its

strength in the midst of its decline in the 20th century and now in the 21st century. But no matter what the history books will write about us in this age, what God will ask us about is what will matter. He will ask us how we have honored Jesus in this life, both with our words and with our deeds.

That's in part why I've spoken against the dark holiday, at least against celebrating death, evil and the occult this week. As I've said to the children, let's not celebrate evil or death or darkness, but celebrate Jesus. It's not only this week that I would say this, but every week. You know your hearts and your children's hearts. I don't legislate, I simply ask you to ask the One whom you know about this week. You've probably already decided what you are going to do. I'm asking you to understand the choice you have made, and reflect on it.

All of us need help on our day to day decisions. It is not just this week, but all the time. The great reformation themes of faith alone, grace alone and Scripture alone are there to draw us back to the Word, the Word made flesh, the written Word of God and the Word of life which we hear in our prayers and Scripture.

None of this is new. I will often be asking you to consider where you are in trusting God, in receiving grace to go on in living out the faith, and listening to God in regular Scripture reading. As it says in Revelation 1, "Blessed are those who read the words of this book..." There is something in regularly reading the Word of God, even if we don't understand every part of it, nevertheless our commitment to the One who caused it to be written is affirmed as we read...

The beauty of our faith is wrapped up in the beauty of the object of our faith: Jesus Christ. It is the strength of his conviction, his passion for the lost, lonely, downcast, needy and everyone else he encountered rings out clearly from every part of Scripture. It is true that he comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable.

Now we carry the light of Christ, the love of Christ, the justice of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit who keeps the church alive, who teaches us His ways and who provides a mission for us to carry out.

This week we have a homecoming to say to all who have been affiliated here, "Welcome home." Of course, the true home is where each of us turns when we need the depths of love, the intimacy of forgiveness and the challenges of truth and justice. The home we offer is a pointer to that ultimate home in God's house. There in John 14, we see the great reunion, where everyone will agree with the Way, the Truth and the Life. To that home, we look forward, even as we celebrate this home in the meanwhile.

God bless you this week,

Let us pray.