

2.16.2020 Sexagesima (2 Corinthians 11:19-31; Luke 8:4-15)

The Apostle Paul had it all. He had wisdom. He had zeal. He had personal encounters with the Lord. He had visions. He had revelations. He had the experience of being taken up to the highest heaven, where he gazed on the indescribable and heard the unspeakable. The Apostle Paul had it all. He had beatings. He had imprisonments. He had persecutions beyond measure. He had weakness. He had afflictions. He had a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan sent to torment him.

The Apostle Paul had it all, yet in his second letter to the Corinthians, this saint who had it all focuses not on the miraculous experiences or the courageous strength of his Christian witness, but on the countless trials he endured and his own weakness. Paul wrote, *“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness”* (2 Corinthians 11:30 ESV), if I must glory, I will *“glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me”* (2 Corinthians 12:9 KJV). It’s not difficult to notice that his inspired words don’t line up very well with what our culture has taught us. The society in which we live tells us to accentuate the positive, and eliminate the negative. We celebrate victory, we don’t brag about weakness or failure, so why would Paul?

In the context of this sermon, because the Apostle Paul had it all. He had knowledge. He had experience. He had perspective. He had the perspective of a man who was once a merciless persecutor of Christians, who served as the witness at the stoning death of the first Christian martyr, who the Bible describes as one who breathed out *“threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord”* (Acts 9:1). The Apostle Paul also had the perspective of a man whose life was immediately and miraculously changed when he encountered our Lord on the road to Damascus, who served as a Gospel preacher, a missionary, and church planter. He had the perspective of an Apostle, who under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote nearly half the books in the New Testament, a man who God declared was *“a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel”* (Acts 9:15).

The Apostle Paul had it all. In his life he’d run the gamut from unthinkable

lows to unimaginable highs, and when he stepped back and considered all of these things from his unparalleled perspective, his conclusion was this: If I must boast... *"I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me"* (2 Corinthians 12:9 NASB). Now if we were given a list of events in the life of St. Paul, I believe most of us would point to the visions, the revelations, and the miraculous Spirit-filled moments as those that were most important, but Paul doesn't see it that way. From his perspective, the most significant, miraculous moments in his life were moments of weakness, moments that led him to a greater awareness of the grace, the strength, and the power of Christ dwelling in him.

Paul viewed weakness and affliction as a blessing and a privilege. He saw his own finite, human frailty as an opportunity for the infinite power of Almighty God to rest upon him, and as difficult as it is, we should see our trials and weaknesses in the same way. One thing that is clear in Paul's example is that we can't be afraid, or unwilling, to come to the end of our rope - to come to the end of ourselves, for it is there that we are certain to meet Christ. As I read this passage, I was struck by the thought that perhaps it's those two things, fear and unwillingness, that so often keep us from experiencing the power of Christ dwelling in us. Therefore, as we consider the example that Paul sets for Christians, it's good to ask ourselves:

Are we afraid? Afraid of what others may think of our Christian faith? Afraid of losing friends, offending others with the Truth of the Gospel, or exposing our own weakness? Are we afraid of what it may cost us to take up our cross and follow Christ, the One who for Love took up His Cross for us?

Are we unwilling? Unwilling to fast and pray and give? Are we unwilling to suffer? Are we unwilling to become broken bread and poured out wine for the sake of our Lord and Savior, the One who became broken bread and poured out wine for us?

I thought the Apostle Paul had it all, but those are two qualities that he did not possess. St. Paul wasn't afraid, nor was he unwilling to spend and be spent for the sake of our Lord. After hearing the Word of God, he kept it in his heart and never counted the cost, but simply loved and served God by loving and serving the world that God gave the life of His one and only Son

to save. St. Paul is an example of the good ground that Jesus spoke of in the parable we heard this morning, for unlike the seeds that fell among rocks or thorns, which were swept away in times of temptation, or were choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of this life, the seed that fell on the good soil of Paul's heart took root, and grew, and still bears fruit today (Luke 8:4-15).

That seed bears fruit even today because by the grace of God, St. Paul received it, held it close, and never let anything take it from his heart; not beatings or imprisonments, not hunger or thirst, not cold or nakedness. St. Paul fought "*the good fight of faith*" (1 Timothy 6:12) against countless forces, he kept the Word in his heart, he brought forth fruit, and in the end, instead of taking credit for the victory, he tells us that battle was won because God's grace is sufficient, and God's strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

We can be sure the forces that attacked St. Paul are at work against us. The Bible tells us to put on the full armor of God, "*for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*" (Ephesians 6:12). Take a moment to consider that verse, and you'll certainly conclude that apart from God, this isn't a fair fight. Without God's sufficient grace and His perfect strength, this is a fight we cannot win, yet our Lord assures us that in Him, with Him, and through Him, the victory is ours, because the Victory is His. When our Savior Christ rose victorious over sin and death, we, who are "*crucified with Christ*" (Galatians 2:20) rose victorious over sin and death, for Scripture declares: "*If we died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him*" (2 Timothy 2:11-12a).

The lesson we learned from a saint this morning is one found throughout Holy Scripture, the truth that "*With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible*" (Matthew 19:26). St. Paul was once a murdering Pharisee, but in, with, and through Christ he became an instrument in God's mighty hand. The many trials and sorrows that he endured in his walk with Christ left him time and again in an impossible situation, yet Paul tells us that it was there, at the end of his rope, that He met Christ, and therefore we can

conclude that it's when we are willing to come to the end of ourselves, that we will meet Christ. It's when we are willing to become broken bread and poured out wine for His sake that we will find God's grace is sufficient, and God's strength is made perfect in weakness. By the grace of God may we receive our Lord today "*in an honest and good heart*" (Luke 8:15), hold Him close, and like St. Paul, boast in our weakness... glory in our infirmities... that the power of Christ may dwell in us.