

July 7, 2024
St. Paul's Cleveland Heights
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Thank you for having me. It's my honor to serve St Paul's this morning and anytime I can be here.

Today we're going to spend some time with Paul in Corinth. In our passage, Paul was frustrated with the church in Corinth because they were taken in by a group of visionaries who claimed to have miraculous power from God. Perhaps they saw visions or claimed to work miracles we don't and can't know for sure. Whatever the case, the church was so impressed by these claims to power that Paul seemed to be pretty ordinary. Paul relayed a miraculous experience that "his good friend" had (likely talking about himself) but undercuts that and reframes Christian power as based on human weakness and reliance on God. This passage has become my thorn in the flesh for the last month and I'm hoping today God can give us both wisdom and guidance on how to apply it in our lives.

When I read the passage for today it reminded me of the many people, mostly men, who claim power and gather a crowd of fiercely loyal supporters around them. One such man was a US president. This man had significant power in reshaping the US and possessed a loyal following that refused to see his flaws. He had an almost divine kind of power over his followers. Many conservative Christians saw him as God's agent. Someone who would take America back for God.

His opponents claimed he was a liar and guilty of several crimes to hold on to political power. He claimed his opponents were partisans on a smear campaign and that he was not only innocent of all crimes but the only one who could save the good, god-fearing, patriotic American citizens from their enemies, both foreign and domestic.

This man, of course, was Richard Nixon.

Nixon, of course, was guilty. But all sorts of people believed he was innocent, regardless of the evidence against him. Smart people, wealthy people, professors, doctors, lawyers, loving mothers, doting fathers, lots and lots of people were taken in. Why? Because they thought he had power. Power to accomplish their goals. Power to save them. Power to bring order to chaos. He exhibited strength and claimed he could fix their problems and people bought in.

This is a very human behavior. All kinds of people are primed to be taken in when folks claim to have the power to help them. They are primed to do so today and they were primed to do so in Paul's day.

Paul's opponents didn't claim political power but rather divine power through mystical experiences. Though Paul subtly lays claim to his own kind of mystical experience, he does not engage in a kind of "mine is better than theirs" style argument. That would be to accept his opponent's

premise: that visible power, charisma, and mystical experiences are a sign of God's presence. No. He claims the God of the Bible doesn't work that way. Our God's power is made visible in weakness.

12:10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Nixon and Paul's opponents said power is seen in strength. Paul says weakness.

His claim seems odd until we start reading the Bible.

Who did God call when They wanted to form a people who would know God and proclaim them to the world? God, decided to begin a nation with an elderly man and his wife, who were not able to have children even when they were young. God promised this nomadic elderly man that he would not only be the father of many nations but also that his large family would settle and develop the land he only roamed on. It's because of the unlikelihood of God's promise and Abraham's obvious inability to accomplish it on his own that when it happened God's power was revealed.

When God's people were enslaved in Egypt, who did God choose to represent Them and lead the people to freedom? God called Moses, an elderly fugitive, with a speech impediment. It was Moses' job to confront the ruler who ordered him to be killed and command him to release his free labor force. Moses had no army, never wielded a sword, and required his brother to speak for him, but God used Moses to free the people and display God's power in the world.

Of course, our chief example is Christ. When God decided to become incarnate in humanity They didn't choose to be born in Rome, the center of the Western world. They didn't choose to be in the center of Jewish culture in Jerusalem. God chose to be born into a poor family, in rural Galilee, the backwater of backwaters. And when Jesus went to proclaim the kingdom of God, he chose to spend most of his time with the poor, rural folks. Though he claimed power from God he used that to cure and feed the sick and hungry not to elevate himself.

Though he knew he would die if he went to Jerusalem but he still went and delivered himself to his enemies. Our God put off limitless power to become human. Then they went even farther and let the state arrest and kill him. We as Christians venerate the cross. We have a very large example here today and in most Christian churches around the world. It is through this greatest example of God's weakness that we see God's greatest example of power in the Resurrection. Time and time again, all throughout Scripture, God uses human weakness and frailty to display their strength to heal the world, to bring life from death.

Perhaps because this model is so counter to our cultural narrative it seems especially hard to remember.

I had some friends give me advice on this sermon and they offered two bits of wisdom. First, this is in no way a theological justification for living in abusive or unjust circumstances. We as Episcopalians have taken baptismal vows to resist evil and to strive for peace and justice in the world. We have no obligation to put up with injustice and abuse anywhere for any reason, especially not because our weakness in those moments gives God a chance to shine.

We don't need to manufacture weakness in the world because, and this is the other bit of wisdom, we as humans are already pretty weak and fallible. We're not in control of the world. We can't predict the future well. We lose our temper. We don't live up to our promises. We fail each other and ourselves time and time again.

Risk, change, uncertainty, and asking for forgiveness are the norms in our life even if we pretend otherwise. And it's not like that's how God wants it, it's just that God is aware of that while we tend to forget. A core piece of growth in the Christian life is to keep our need to depend on God's strength in the forefront of our minds.

If you feel like you're struggling to hold it all together, if you feel like everyone else around you knows what's going on but you- they don't! And you don't have to pretend to either. No one is in total control. No one knows what is going on.

If you feel like, actually everything is on track and lined up and ordered just how you want- perhaps be open to God calling you off track. Remember, Moses had a 5-year plan: tend sheep and live well with his new family. God had other ideas. Listen for the call of God to do something wild, and risky, where you'll have to trust them to support you- something they're already doing every second of every day. Try new things, take risks, start a union, and be actively listening for the wild call that will put you out of your comfort zone, it will feel like it's all falling apart but maybe it'll also feel like freedom.

So we individually live life as best we can. We muddle through to the best of our ability, ideally relying on God to give us strength. And God continues to call us into weakness and outside our comfort zone to further their mission in the world and learn to rely on Them more and more each day. That's us individually.

What about y'all collectively as St Paul's?

Do we have any folks trained by Greater Cleveland Congregations (GCC) here? How does GCC define power? (Organized power and organized money)

I'm not sure you all know this- but St Paul's is the largest and wealthiest church in the diocese. The largest site of organized people and organized money. I learned this from a retired clergy person, I said, "Wait, larger than the Cathedral?" and they laughed at me. "Yes, of course. St Paul's by a mile."

So here's what's been eating away at me for a month, I want to pass on this thorn from my side to yours. If God's power is made perfect in human weakness, if it shines through the clearest when we're consciously relying on Them and Their strength- how do you run a church that is as naturally powerful as yours?

I don't presume to know the answer to this question, but here are some directions to think about. Remember, these biblical figures I pulled out, weren't total failures. Moses had a family and a seemingly successful job as a farmer. From other texts, it sounds like Abraham was a very wealthy person and a successful farmer. Lots of farmers in the Bible. They experienced God's power coming

through when God pulled them out of their comfort zones and into a mission that was impossible for them to do on their own.

You're in a time of significant transition. You've had a total staff turnover and you're beginning to seek out who your next leader will be. It's a time when it makes sense to be anxious and I anticipate my natural reaction would be to hope that after we find the next leader everything will settle down and go back to normal.

When I think of the cross, of God's power made perfect in weakness, my hope for St Paul's is that there is no new normal. In a world that is rocked with change and anxiety, that is crying out for help, I hope that God calls y'all into work that seems impossible to accomplish, or perhaps only possible with God's help. I hope for anxious and controversial board meetings. I hope for sleepless nights wrestling with God on the right decision to make. I hope y'all find unlikely allies to engage in shocking behavior with. I hope you challenge the status quo and make lots and lots of powerful enemies. I hope you do more good than you ever thought possible.

Because it's not when everything is easy that we find God's strength. It's when we're wrapped in something bigger than ourselves. Something that makes us feel weak. Something that requires us to lean on God for help every step of the way. For God's strength is sufficient in our weakness and whenever we are weak, only then are we strong.