

“A Box of Duds”

Sunday, July 4, 2021

1 Corinthians 12:2-10

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God’s power provides us hope in moments of vulnerability and weakness, offering a reminder of Christ’s transforming presence in our lives and our world.

Those of you who are watching the sermon online may be wondering if we’re live streaming worship from the set of a Branson theater. Have no fear: we are right here where we have always been at the corner of Clayton and Strecker Roads. You are not looking at the parapets of the Tower of London nor is our worship centered around “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” It is Vacation Bible School week, and we are getting ready for the Quest for the King’s Armor at North Castle!

That quest will happen thanks to our many volunteers as we are guided by this verse from Ephesians, “Be strong in the Lord.”

The theme verse comes from Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter 6. Paul admonishes the church at Ephesus to stand firm in the strength of their conviction. He uses the metaphor of a Roman soldier’s armor to reinforce his message of standing firm in the face of trials and tribulations. It’s a message that we hear throughout our lives, and we have internalized it – or at least a version of it.

Be strong!

I remember walking into the funeral home the night of the visitation for my father. My aunt pulled on arm and looked me in the eye, telling me, “You’ve got to be strong.” Years and years before, when I was a child about to undergo surgery, my mom said, “You can be strong.” The line gets rehearsed and revisited throughout our lives.

We so often sing that great hymn by Harry Emerson Fosdick “God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power...give us courage, give us wisdom, for the facing of this hour.”

But as I was getting ready for this sermon, I thought about how this beautiful presentation that Suzanne Norvell crafted might collide with other words from Paul.

In particular, I wondered about the strangeness of saying “Be Strong” juxtaposed with our scripture this morning where Paul tells us “whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

How is that we can be “strong” even in our most vulnerable moments?

It seems a bit trite to say to the victims of a tragedy such as the building that collapsed in Miami, to “be strong.” When you’re handed a box of duds, and life seems empty of all hope, it is difficult to find strength.

And that got me thinking about the time my brother blew up the neighbor's fence post.

Some of you know that my siblings are quite a bit older than I am. My brother, who died in 2018, was 13 years older than me which means that he had the privilege of being a teenager with a pain in the neck little brother. One year while Cliff was in high school, our dad decided our neighborhood's July 4th celebrations were a bit too tame. We lived in New Jersey in a county where firecrackers were illegal, but one of my father's sales reps lived in Alabama, where the laws were a bit lax. Dad called Mr. Hughes and asked if he would be willing to bring up a few fireworks for the family. Apparently, Mr. Hughes wanted to please my father, his boss. He brought so many fire crackers that his wife made him call from the airport to make sure he landed without an incident. Obviously this was in the days prior to security screening.

I don't know the exact number, but I do know that he was the equivalent of a walking armory. We might not have been able to blow up the George Washington Bridge, but we certainly could have done sizable damage.

My brother saw this as a challenge: what could he ignite? He grew tired of scaring me and moved on to bigger projects, including putting large fire crackers inside coffee cans—which is how he blew up our neighbor's fence.

At any rate, other than living in fear of what would explode next, I learned a new word that summer: duds. The boxes of firecrackers all said, "No duds! Guaranteed!" And while that sounded impressive, the truth was the exporter's quality assurance measures were lacking. There were duds. And there were plenty.

Duds, at least as far as my dad and brother were concerned, were unacceptable. They were a weakness in their plan to dominate the realm of backyard pyrotechnics. Duds were a sign of failure.

After dinner tonight, we'll gather with friends and family. Some of us will watch dazzling professionally produced fireworks displays while others will hold their breath that their crazy uncle lights up rockets in the backyard. There will be no more tolerance for duds than there will be for anemic potato salad.

Afterall, we celebrate something astonishing. We celebrate our nation's founding—a nation built on large principles of strength and power.

You might know that Presbyterians played a key role in the American revolution. They were not of one mind, which of course is still the case. Some were supporters of England, but many Presbyterians dissented from England's rule. Twelve of the 26 signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterian, including the Rev. John Witherspoon, who was the only clergy person to sign. He just happened to be from Princeton. The Rev. George Duffield of the Old Pine Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia (which is still in existence) served as chaplain to the continental congress. Presbyterians so dominated the revolution that when the war broke

out the Prime Minister of England rose in Parliament and said, “It seems Cousin America has gone and run off with the Presbyterian parson.”

Presbyterians have certainly helped shape the ideas that strength is a sign of success—but our history suggests that our power emerged from the sidelines. We appeared to be nothing more than a box of duds. The power of Presbyterians in the revolution seemed slight compared to the powers of England. And the power of abolitionists seemed weak compared to the power of slavery. The power of Civil Rights protestors seemed inadequate to the powers of white supremacy. The power of faith always seems to be weaker than the powers of the world.

Paul suggests that faith emerges from those empty places the world deems were nothing more than a box of duds. While our world is defined by acts of power, Paul’s experience of Christ has changed his way of viewing the world. Paul understood the world of strategy and highly-polished success: he lived in the Roman Empire where power was equated with strength. And in a cosmopolitan city like Corinth, strength was the currency of success—strength of knowledge, strength of commerce, strength of athleticism, strength of wisdom. There is little room nor little tolerance in Corinth for weakness.

In fact, if you can manage to make your way through Paul’s often tortuous sentence structure in Second Corinthians, what emerges is his concern that the church has been hijacked by leaders who preach what amounted to a version of the prosperity gospel. They were arguing that their credentials were stronger than Paul’s, and that they had experienced more ecstatic spiritual experiences.

In case you missed it, the gem hidden underneath Paul’s often tortuous sentence structure is this: “my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

What Paul lacks in clarity he overcomes with passion and earnestness. Paul’s leadership as an apostle had apparently been questioned by a group of rival preachers in Corinth - Paul calls them “super apostles. The church which Paul sees as his pride and joy is now filled with all sorts of dissent by those who had accused Paul of being weak. In response, Paul pushes back with a letter blasting these opponents, and reminding the Corinthians of his true credentials as an apostle.

And the good news he offers us is the reminder that we are loved fully and unconditionally by God, and that this love is revealed to us even in the moments of greatest weakness. Underneath all of Paul’s convoluted arguments and rhetoric lies this essential word of gospel truth: the moments when we discover we are most vulnerable are also the moments when God’s grace is perfected in us.

As the late, great theologian Shirley Guthrie observed, “God’s love is not a reward for what we have done or have not done, but a gift given absolutely freely, with no strings attached.” The result is, says Guthrie, “We are justified in Christ. That means that things are ‘made right’

between us and God—not because we love God, but because in Christ God loves us.” (Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 319).

I imagine Paul took a long breath after dictating these sentences. Yes, we will experience painful “thorns in the flesh.” Faith will not remove suffering and struggle. But grace will allow us to endure. Grace gives us the strength to see God walking along the pathways of our lives. We may experience moments when the pain of those thorns feels stronger than hope, but it is exactly at those times that Paul calls us to remember the promise Christ makes: my grace is sufficient for you my power is made perfect in weakness. Amen.