

Wrestling (humbly) with the Devil:

On Strength in Weakness

Introduction

Strength in weakness.

Have you ever had the experience of a dream going unfulfilled? Or how about the feeling of failure that comes when, no matter how hard you tried, and even though you were really, really good, you just weren't good enough? Maybe you have found yourself in a place where your driving purpose in life, that thing that you felt was more important than anything else and that defined who you are in some sense... was ridiculed by more influential or popular people. Or maybe you yourself started to second guess whether you were living for the right thing. Our text for this morning gives us an opportunity to explore these themes through the life of the Apostle Paul, his vision of good news for the poor, and his struggle over how to make sense of things when they didn't work out how he hoped. In 2 Corinthians, we have a window into Paul's life and ministry and in particular the difficulties he encountered in making a compelling presentation of the gospel of Jesus as good news for the poor and the powerless. For those who might not be familiar with Paul's story, I want to start by telling you a bit about his life and background, and I think that might then help us, second, to understand the situation Paul was dealing with in Corinth in this letter. Finally, third, we can unpack his struggle with weakness and anxiety and see how he ultimately found grace and strength.

Paul's Story

So, Saul, being Paul's Hebrew name, was a trained Torah scholar, who at one time rubbed shoulders with and worked for some of the top religious teachers in Jerusalem. And in earliest days of the movement forming around Jesus - this movement was called "the Way" - Saul was maniacally and violently critical of the movement, persecuting its followers even to the death, according to the book of Acts. He says in one of his letters, in fact, that he was well known for this. Until, at some point, in fact while he was engaged in trying to put down the movement, Saul was on his way to Damascus, and it says in the book of Acts, chapter 9, that he had a mystical encounter with Jesus. I am referring to the so-called "conversion of St. Paul episode on the Damascus road. In this vision of Jesus - maybe it was a different vision than the one he describes in our text for today, but maybe it was the same one..., I think there are some good reasons for thinking that might be the case - but in any case, in this vision of Jesus on the Damascus road, there's a flash of light, Saul is struck blind, and there's a voice asking Saul about how he relates to Jesus. Afterward, Saul heads into the town, where people are amazed that this Saul, who was raving around violently tracking down followers of Jesus' way, this same Saul is now in his right mind and seeking to join them.

Ok. So, time passes, Saul spends the next fourteen years working in and around his home region of Tarsus, in the northeast corner of the Mediterranean. Now, this region was populated largely by non-Jews, and so Saul starts using his Roman name, Paul, and he picks up a few Gentile converts and colleagues. Except for one short visit with Peter and James in Jerusalem, early on after his vision, Paul stays up north, working with the communities of Jesus followers emerging among Gentiles.

But, finally, after fourteen years, he heads to Jerusalem and has a private audience with the leaders of the new movement in order to make sure that he has understood the message of Jesus and the task correctly. In particular, he wanted to ask how the non-Jewish communities he is working with should relate to Torah observance. The leaders in Jerusalem recognize and authorize his work among the Gentiles as like in spirit and application to their own work among their Jewish communities, and they do not require Paul's non-Jewish colleagues to observe the requirements of the Torah. Now it is at this point that Paul, where he is telling this story in his letter to the community in Galatia (Galaterbrief), Paul highlights one small but hugely significant detail. He reports that in that private audience with the leaders in Jerusalem they told him only one thing was essential: that this was a gospel, good news, for the poor, the weak, those who were living at the margins of society, first and foremost. Great, Paul says, that's exactly the program I've been trying to develop.

Paul's Situation

So this is the message Saul/Paul had been teaching in Galatia / Asia Minor and then Greece and, specifically, the city of Corinth. Why is all of this at all relevant for our sermon text this morning? I think it sheds interesting light on the core teaching of 2 Corinthians, namely, strength in weakness, power to the powerless. Paul's vision of strength in weakness is not an esoteric insight about self-depriving, strict religious asceticism or something. It is the extension of his gospel to the poor: the saving, rescuing, healing power of God revealed in Jesus, was revealed in Jesus' weakness and is encountered ever and again by those who likewise find themselves in places of loss, suffering, abandonment and powerlessness. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

In the NT, we have two main sets of writings by Paul to the church gatherings in Corinth. The letter we know as 1 Corinthians and then 2 Corinthians, which seems like it might be a collection of snippets of letters from Paul, pieced together into a kind of Briefwechsel, a Pauline reader, if you will, on power and weakness. In fact, if there's one thing that holds all of the Corinthian texts together, and also connects them to Paul's biography, it might be this: The good news revealed in Jesus is not experienced in being impressive, being the best, most qualified, most accomplished, and following Jesus doesn't *make* you any of those things either. Following Jesus means caring for the needs of others, not showing other people how great you are. Those who are in Christ love one another, encourage one another, share with one another, listen to one another, prefer one another over oneself.

There are a whole bunch of pastoral issues that come up in the first letter: Challenges in relationships; Paul radically says both partners have needs and rights, not just husbands over

wives. Challenges in the churches' gatherings; Paul says women should also be able to prophesy and pray in the gatherings, wearing the same covering that a priest would. Challenges over leadership and authority; Paul urges his readers not to cultivate spiritual practices that make yourself as an individual look especially enlightened, insightful, wise like doing miracles or speaking in tongues. Instead, cultivate those practices that encourage and help the whole community of those gathered, like teaching and encouragement. And, finally, challenges in supporting the community; in fact, it seems that one of the main things Paul did when he was *in* Corinth, although he did not ask for any financial support from the community for himself, he apparently did ask them to support the poor in Jerusalem. Oops.

Paul's Struggle

And that's when everything went to shit. After Paul had left Corinth and been away for a while, other voices in the church community started suggesting a different gospel and different perspective: Well, you know, letters are nice, but what do those religious elites know, really, about our situation here in Corinth? They're off in Jerusalem or Brussels or wherever it is they sit in their fancy conference rooms. It's easy for them to make decisions about who is needy and who needs what rights. And, right, like, you've got needs, too, don't you, and they don't take you seriously, they don't listen to you. And they're telling you that your traditions don't matter, your culture, your identity, that those things aren't important? Trust us instead. We will protect and preserve who we are and our customs and our rights. We follow the law of our people, and we can promise you miracles! We can be powerful. Other people ought to listen to and follow us! So trust us, follow us,... fund us.

In 2 Corinthians Paul is engaged in an ongoing debate, really, with these self-aggrandizing preachers of a gospel of power, whom he calls "super-apostles". These super apostles were apparently trying to convince people to follow them by saying Paul was not as pious as they were, not as spiritually powerful as they were, and moreover that he was trying to take their money for himself.

Super-apostles. Heroes. Patriots. Rising stars. It's interesting how familiar this situation is today. Super-apostles. We just love an impressive personality and show of strength, don't we? Especially when they are superpatriots who tell us that the weak and poor, those on the margins of society - they are not fellow human beings but enemies want only to steal and take away what is rightfully ours. Especially when super-scientists tell us that if we increase our own rankings, not only do we do not have to pay more but we *get* more funding. Especially when supermen tell us we don't have to change anything, and warn us that if we liberalize our norms and cultivate more inclusive practices, the whole system will fail.

Paul calls these super apostles tricksters, smooth talkers, fear mongers, adversaries. They come with flashes of light and fireworks and impressive feats of strength. They tell us exactly what we want to hear, and we love it and eat it up. How sweet, how convincing the gospel of power is to the powerful.

Paul's account of his mystical vision in our sermon text today makes me wonder whether he was familiar with this struggle, not only in relation to the other people acting like super-apostles, but also on a much more personal level. Had not Saul sought to convince people of his commitment to traditional values? Had not Paul impressive accomplishments of his own? And then he had this vision of a different program, a different way. But it sounds like maybe he still found himself really tempted to convince people by impressing them, or perhaps to show off how spiritual or moral or intelligent or skilled he was and thus how his vision was better than others', how he deserved influence and power and control over how things should be done.

But instead he experienced inability, he wasn't convincing, his vision was met with indifference and outright opposition. He wasn't very articulate or a charismatic personality. He didn't bring funding. He didn't offer connections to circles of power or a boost in rankings. And so his message didn't seem to find a lot of resonance. And he was despairing over this. Why isn't this working? What am I doing wrong?

In many places in the NT we find Paul trying to defend himself, his credibility as a leader and the credibility of the vision that had changed his life. But it sounds like Paul also wrestled continuously with his own demons, partially demons of self-doubt and anxiety, but also demons of self-promotion and selfish aspirations. And he found himself being reminded again and again, that the power of the good news encountered in the cross of Jesus is perfected in the place of weakness. The hope announced in the cross of Christ is not that I or my group or my program might become stronger and more powerful than all the rest. Rather, it is hope that it is possible for everyone to be and to live well, and therefore it is a hope first and foremost for the weak and the poor and the oppressed.

This is what led Paul finally to conclude that grace is enough: accepting the weak and accepting being accepted in your own weakness is what perfected strength looks like.