

“Complete Power” 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Rev. Michele Ward

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

July 4, 2021 Ordinary Time

It seems ironic that the lectionary passage today speaks of strength through weakness as our nation celebrates Independence Day, a day full of parades, flags, and cookouts. On a day we celebrate the successful victory of our nation over the British Empire, Paul gives us this phrase to ponder: “whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” This is a bold claim, and it directly contradicts what we lift up today as a country: our fixation on military power, self-sufficiency, and strength. In Paul’s day, his claim would directly challenge the Roman Empire’s love of military conquest and their honor/shame culture.

Paul is consistent with his theology from his first letter to the church in Corinth. In that first exchange, he goes into significant detail to tell them that the God they worship is a crucified, humiliated Son of God, a Son of God in stark contrast to the Roman emperor who called himself by the same name. The Word made flesh in Jesus Christ does not reign with domination or threats. God reigns through serving, through suffering, through weakness.

It is this reality--that God reigns through serving, suffering and weakness--of which Paul is reminding the church in Corinth. In this segment of the letter, Paul is defending himself against complaints from earlier in the letter about the ways he does not ‘look’ like a leader to them because of traits that make him look weak in their eyes. They accuse him of having a “weak bodily presence” and “contemptible speech” - to translate, they find him unattractive and a poor public speaker. The main reason they look at Paul and find him this way is due to visits from who Paul refers to as ‘super apostles’ --shinier, charming, and visibly more powerful preachers who show up in Corinth preaching a very different message than Paul.

He reminds them that he could brag about himself if we wanted to do that. He is a Pharisee, a Roman citizen, a descendant of Abraham, and has survived torture and imprisonment. He references himself in the third person, claiming ‘he knows a guy’ who had visions and received divine revelation, but most of it cannot be shared or understood.

He chooses not to brag about himself. Instead, he tells them about his weakness. He refers to a ‘thorn,’ some kind of difficulty, that he asks God to remove. Paul realizes that this unidentified difficulty must stay. It is what keeps him humble, what makes him fit for service. God tells Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you” --you can rely on me when you feel weak. You are the best witness to who I am in your suffering.

Now, I want to be clear--I am not saying that God caused Paul’s suffering in order for God to show up in Paul’s life so Paul could be a witness to God’s power and strength. The NRSV says that God’s power is made ‘perfect’ in

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weakness. Paul is saying that his weakness is a part of him, and God shows up in his weakness. The word for ‘perfect’ here is from the Greek root *teleo*, which means ‘complete, finished, or ended.’¹ The concordance, or Greek Bible dictionary, refers to this word, *teleo*, as meaning to “reach[sic] the *end (aim)*.” It is well-illustrated with the old pirate’s telescope, unfolding (extending out) one stage at a time to function at full-strength (capacity effectiveness).²

I share this illustration with you because I want us to reimagine power using this image. Paul is not saying that God inflicted this suffering upon him like one of his torturers, prison guards or abusers. Paul’s weakness is a part of his nature, just as God’s incarnation through Jesus Christ is also a display of suffering, of weakness, of serving. Our weaknesses, vulnerabilities, are what make us complete, are what make us whole. Another way to phrase this line would be, “God’s power is completely fulfilled, made whole, reaches its goal, lives out its purpose, in weakness.”

God invites Paul into a vulnerable and interdependent relationship. God invites Paul into a relationship where others will experience God through us when we are weak and need support. God shows up, not through military prowess, fierce independence, or conquest, but through interdependence, through communities where people show up for one another and help each other. We reveal God to one another through our needs, not just through our support of one another.

Paul’s leadership crisis with the church in Corinth presents a unique challenge to us today. The church in Corinth is not the only community that has an idea of what leadership, attractiveness, and authority look like--according to queer writer and leader Vanessa Rochelle Lewis, the Corinthian church has ‘uglified’ Paul because they find him physically weak, a bad public speaker, and unattractive compared to the ‘super apostles’ that show up in their community who are more attractive and persuasive than Paul. Lewis writes, “Uglification consists of personal and cultural beliefs, behaviors, practices, and laws that dehumanize people as ugly, undesirable, immoral, and unworthy. It feeds, maintains, and depends on oppression, such as lookism, racism, ableism, sexism, and homo, trans, fat, and xenophobia. Unchecked, it facilitates, normalizes, and validates hatred, childhood bullying, workplace exclusion, criminalization, medical neglect, violence, exploitation, and more.”³

¹ *Strong’s Bible Concordance*, 5055.

² *Strong’s*, 5055.

³ Lewis, Reclaiming Ugly, “What is uglification?” <https://reclaimugly.org/about-us/>

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Attractiveness and unattractiveness are not universal qualities. They are an intersection of politicized qualities that typically include body size, body shape, racially-identified physical characteristics, gender conformity, and physical ability. They can also include traits that demonstrate wealth and social class, like hairstyles and clothing. They work in the world--they determine who has power and authority, to whom the public listens, to whom companies will consider for employment, how the healthcare system treats patients, and more.

Paul reclaims his ugliness. He reclaims his weakness. He reclaims what he is told makes him a poor leader and reminds the church in Corinth that God made him this way on purpose, that he fulfills God's purpose exactly how he is. I want this for us, too, not just in our national consciousness, in how we structure our community, and in how we organize ourselves internally. This interpretation brings us to some tough questions. Paul is challenging us to ask ourselves who we personally respect the most and who our community as a whole respects. Paul is forcing us to take a hard look at who has authority in our community, and why they have that authority.

We do not find our power by being the most societally attractive, charismatic, or physically strong. We find our power by reclaiming all of the ways God made us. All of what society tells us makes us weak, ugly, ineffective, lacking. God is there, in our weakness. God's purposes are fulfilled there.

So go--go and reclaim our complete power, the power that already lives within each of us. How would our community be different if we did not need to have it all together, if we did not need to hide our weaknesses, if we did not need to hide our personal struggles, if we chose to stop serving power structures that do not serve? How would our community reflect God's power completely if we answered and acted on these questions?