

7th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.7.24

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 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.

Mark 6:1-13

Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.

On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. (548)

Fintan O’Toole had an article out this week. Irish critic of the literary and the social, O’Toole is also an Advising Editor at the *New York Review of Books*, which is where this article was published, “Savior Complex.” In it, he notices how both our presidential candidates have taken on an idea about themselves. Donald Trump has held this self-image for a long time. “I alone can fix it,” he said on the campaign trail running up to the 2016 election. Joe Biden, a long-time senator, has come to this more recently.

In the Senate, of course, you have built-in the idea that only together can we “fix it.” The world’s greatest deliberative body, the United States Senate has been called. But whether *that’s* true or not, it is in any event to be a deliberative body, which means no one member is the one to save the day, at least not on the regular. All of this is to say, it’s likely Biden has a strong sense of himself as collaborative.

Or has until recently. He has more recently talked of himself as the only one who can beat Trump in November.

There’s no evidence of this. He is the only one who *has* beaten Trump in an election, the one of two elections Trump has entered as a candidate. So small a sample size, it shouldn’t be interpreted to mean he’s the only one who could. No, indeed, there might be quite a large number of people who could beat Trump in November, not least the one to whom he said he’d pass the baton, his own vice president.

But another conviction has come over him during his presidency, during which time I imagine he’s come to enjoy the powers that come with this, something hard to walk away from. This, O’Toole draws out in his article, and highlights in its subtitle: “Biden’s tragedy is that he has come to feel that he alone can rescue America.” And reading deeply into one of the more excruciating exchanges of last week’s debate, the contested question as to whose golf game is strongest, O’Toole writes, “Not only did the debate come down to this level of mutual fatuity; Trump, rather than Biden, was the first to realize that it was all too embarrassing to be endured. It was the man whose shamelessness knows no limits who grasped how mortifying it was that the past and future leaders of the free world were [stuck on such inanity.] Trump moved to end it: ‘Let’s not act like children.’ Even then Biden was too slow to grasp what was happening, to understand that Trump had just established himself as the adult in the room. Biden continued in playground mode: ‘You are a child.’ It seems that he thought he was winning, that this puerile comeback was somehow a point being scored for democracy...As in some gothic movie, the two men were switching identities...” which, if you ask me, isn’t a trade *up* for Biden.

The wonder of the way of governance in the United States is the separation of powers. This is a reverential nod to the enduring truth that power is best gathered, organized, and expressed when it weaves into itself some certain weakness. This isn’t simply a political truism. This isn’t simply prudence or good manners. It is essential to the enduring mystery of power—that the more power becomes absolute, the more it becomes destructive and ultimately self-destructive, that power will indeed kill itself—but not before it kills a lot of other things in its way.

Paul was perhaps one of the earliest people to recognize and declare this, though even here without a full appreciation of it, without a full appreciation of what a blessing it is when power is coupled with some certain weakness.

The Apostle Paul, he of the 1st century, whose apostolic missions resulted in countless converts to Christianity and countless churches across the Mediterranean, here was a man unique in his genius. He was just charismatic enough to gather people, lots and lots of people, though not to himself but to Christ, who offered a way of life that was better than the pagan way, more sustaining, more humanizing, more gracious, more communal, more considerate of what most people's lives are actually like. Paul was just charismatic enough for people to pay attention to him but not for his own sake but for Christ's sake, paying attention in his presence and also in his absence through the power of his many letters, which he wrote and sent and which we continue to consider down to this day, having heard from one of his letters just moments ago.

The church, or churches, in Corinth were among the more nettlesome to him.

Corinth was itself a crossroads of a place. It occupied the isthmus between mainland Greece and the Peloponnesus, which means people could approach it from nearly all sides by either land or sea, and it seems they did.

This was a worldly city, full of people of all types and stripes.

The congregations of Corinth bore signs of this, which is why Paul seems to have written to them so many times. Though we have two letters to the Corinthians in the Bible, these likely represent five or six that he wrote. The New Testament's 1st Corinthians is likely the second one Paul wrote, in which he refers to a prior letter. As for this, the Bible's 2nd Corinthians, this is likely a composite of two, three, or even four letters. (Not to mention some added verses in the middle that seem more akin to what's found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which come from the Qumran community dating back two centuries earlier than Paul.) Over the course of time these letters seem to stretch, the concerns addressed in them go from questions to conflicts, questions about doctrine and practice to conflicts over authority, who the people should listen to and trust, and why, and how you can tell.

It seems some apostles of a much more aggressive manner have come into Corinth, apostles with much more powerful personalities have come to bear in the Corinthians' house-churches, these many but small gatherings that were apparently easily overcome.

Super-apostles is what Paul calls them—and perhaps because this is what the congregations have come to call them or what they themselves have taken as titles. As Lois Malcolm, a professor

in theology at Luther Seminary, wrote in a commentary on this letter, “Disguising themselves as ‘ministers of righteousness,’ these super-apostles were turning the Corinthians into their ‘slaves’ [which was Paul’s term]—preying on and taking advantage of them, putting on airs around them, shaming them and perhaps even abusing them physically. Paul is frustrated with the Corinthians because they seem so ready to submit to these individuals.

“By contrast,” Malcolm continues, “Paul describes apostolic ministry as a transparent disclosure of truth accessible to everyone’s conscience before God. The proclamation that ‘Christ is Lord’ makes us ‘slaves’ to one another ‘for Jesus’ sake’: it cannot be used—without enacting a contradiction—to deceive, control, or manipulate others.”

Paul also addressed, Malcolm points out, how “these super-apostles sought to establish their authority,” neither of which Paul thought were in accord with the gospel, but both of which were common claims to authority in the ancient world, and as it happens, in the modern world: “those based on having a particular religious, ethnic, or even ‘Christian’ heritage and those based on the mastery of adversity. [By contrast,] the one experience Paul boasts of is his experience in Damascus of being let down in a basket in order to evade persecution. What he boasts of here is not his prowess over suffering, but the help he has received from God—through others—in a time of weakness.”

As for the portion of the Letter we heard from earlier, Malcolm points out, “In addition to their credentials and capacity to master adversity, the super-apostles were probably also using their spiritual experiences as a basis for claiming authority over the Corinthians. In the ancient world, attesting to spiritual journeys was a popular way of claiming divine validation for one’s authority.”

By contrast, “Paul rooted his own call as an apostle in ‘a revelation of Jesus Christ’ he’d experienced 14 years prior, [which he but barely speaks of, and not in ownership of it]. In this passage he refers to his experience of having attained ‘the third heaven,’ another way of speaking about Paradise. Yet Paul is not interested in boasting about these experiences, [which is likely why he spoke of it in the third person, something that happened to someone though not necessarily him.] He does not even know—or care—whether they were ‘in the body’ or ‘out of the body’ experiences... [Rather], Paul grounds his authority in public, accessible truth: ‘what can be seen in me or heard from me.’ He appeals to an authority far more trustworthy—and accessible to others—than his own fleeting experiences: ‘the one who raised the Lord Jesus,’ who ‘will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.’ And God’s grace cannot be contained but continually ‘extends to more and more people.’”

“So,” Malcolm begins her conclusion, “if claims based on lineage, the mastery of hardship, or having special visions and revelations do not count, then how do we discern true spiritual authority? Paul describes a ‘thorn in the flesh’ he has been given—so that he will not have too high an opinion of himself—in order to explain what true spiritual power is all about.

“We have no idea what this ‘thorn’ actually was. [Earlier in this book], Paul draws on imagery from psalms of lament to describe his apostolic life: being afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed. Like the psalmists, Paul mentions these difficulties not to highlight his mastery over adversity—or to let others know how much he has suffered—but rather to stress that God is our source of rescue amid all that we experience.”

I would add here that this dialectical journey between affirmation in faith and then a humbling amidst mystery or circumstantial setback, is what life with Jesus looks like. It’s not an escalator to glory as much a call and response, a tacking into headwinds, a dying and then a rising and then a dying again and then a rising again.

Here’s Malcolm again, “Even though Paul has asked the Lord three times to take away his pain—his ‘thorn in the flesh’—the Lord’s only response has been: ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’ The sufficiency of God’s grace is directly related to the point that ‘power is made perfect in weakness.’”

It captures my attention today that even Paul wished for an unbridling of his power, that even he wished for this thorn in his flesh to be taken from him. Though he could see how warping was the power of the super-apostles, though he could see how their operating in greater power than Paul could muster was essential to their inability truly to be servants of the gospel, Paul nonetheless wished, though he didn’t say it so many terms, to more like them.

I mean, if you had a powerful mind and an indefatigable spirit and a close encounter with the Risen Christ, wouldn’t you also wish to be handsome *and* charming *and* overweening in the capacity to get others to cow before *and* have an impressive golf swing?

But not even Jesus gets such unlimited power. Even he met with limitation, and in his own hometown. It’s interesting that, when he came to stops in what he could accomplish, he appointed apostles, instructed them and empowered them and sent them out to do what he alone couldn’t do, to do indeed what he in certain circumstances couldn’t do at all. It was meeting with a frustration of his power to act in service of the reign of God that had him innovate another way, had him include others, rely on others.

Yes, of course, as the Christ, in important aspects, he alone can save. But also, for the sake of saving grace that is to endure through time, he needed others, he needed the likes of us, he *needs* the likes of us.

I don't know what should happen next as far as our electoral politics go. I don't know what to advise the Democratic party to do when it comes to the relentlessness of time even in face of Biden's astonishing capacity to come back from setbacks, in a few cases setbacks on scale most people couldn't survive. Time is a manager of setback that will not be resisted. That said, I'm relieved to know that no one in any position of power to decide is asking me for that advice.

What I *do* know, thanks to the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the word of Scripture, is that enduring power assumed by one person and one person alone is always deceptive. Not only un-American, it is also, more pressingly, untrue.

It's why I love congregationalism, our mode of governance, here in this church. Though it operates best among a small group, which limits our power to act in big ways, it insists also that power exercised in intimate, immediate ways is more to be trusted for its always being open to negotiation and ever reliant on consent.

Plus, you just never know who the Holy Spirit will alight on as the bearer of wisdom and authority for whatever question lies before us. It could be anyone. It could be everyone.

Thanks be to God.