

**Sermon Title:** “Strength in Weakness?”

**July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021 – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**Text:** 2 Corinthians 12:1-10



**Theme:**

**What's in it for me?**

**Sermon Text:**

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we celebrate our Independence from Great Britain, although it will be observed tomorrow officially due to the 4<sup>th</sup> falling on a Sunday. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776, our founding fathers took a bold step by declaring independence from Great Britain. There was no going back after that. While the war would go on for several more years and it would take French assistance to truly achieve independence, our founding fathers were smart enough to know that we could not repeat previous governments. Drawing on the best aspects of the governments of Britain, Rome, and Greece, our founding fathers formed a new government based on a system of checks and balances. They knew we were sinful and self-centered and so they rose above it by putting in mechanisms to limit how much selfish power one could achieve. They also knew that the nation would need to grow and would need to modify its government. Our founding fathers put in a mechanism to do just that. America also did something different, instead of covering up our sins, we admitted to them, and made corrections. The author of our epistle today is no different.

St. Paul of Tarsus, also known as Saul, was kind of a microcosm of the American story, even though he was not American, nor did he even set foot in America. He was born both a Roman Citizen (thanks to his father), and a Benjaminite. Paul's Jewish heritage and Roman Citizenship were very important to him. His father made sure he had the best Greek education as well as the best Jewish education, becoming the star student of the star Rabbi of his day, Gamaliel. Paul had some of the best academic credentials of his day and had every right to boast in them. In his early life, I'm sure that's what helped get him in audience with the High Priest to seek his authorization and authority to persecute the early Christians. After Paul's

conversion to Christianity, he would continue to use both his Roman Citizenship and his Jewish connections to his advantage in order to spread the Gospel.

In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12, Paul explains why he is so humble. He first discusses an anonymous Christian who died in the faith 14 years earlier. Paul boasts that this man is in heaven. Paul tells us that he refuses to boast in himself but will only boast in others. Then he gets into the heart of this part of his epistle.

In order to prevent Paul from getting too high on himself, God permitted a “thorn given to him in the flesh, a messenger from Satan.” We don’t really know what this thorn was, other than what this text provides. Some speculate that Paul’s past as a persecutor of the faith came back to haunt him, and it may have, we just don’t know if that was the thorn or not. We do however know the effect. It was to keep Paul in check. (If you remember Moses got a little too high on himself and went beyond what God had instructed him to do, hitting the rock and taking credit for it. That sin kept him out of the Land of Canaan until Jesus brought him into it on the Mount of Transfiguration.)

Even though this “thorn” is extremely painful (whether it be physical, emotional, or spiritual), Paul pleaded with God to remove this thorn, but God’s answer is one that I think resonates with all of us, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:9). Weakness? Really? Around the same time Paul was executed, the Jews rose up against Rome, resulting in the destruction of the Temple and then they rose up a second time resulting in their expulsion from the Holy Land. The Jews would not return until 1945. Christians took a weak approach, instead working within the framework of the Roman Empire, enduring persecution, torture, insults, and hardships, but at the same time more and more people converted to Christianity, resulting in its legalization in 318 AD. It soon after became the official religion of the Roman Empire and the Roman Empire preserved many Christian holy sites.

I can certainly relate to Paul. The more I read his epistles, I feel as if I know the guy and consider him a friend, but I too have a thorn in my side. In 2000, I had my heart set on attending Seminary and studying to become a Pastor in the LCMS. I had the recommendation and all I had left was the GRE (Graduate Readiness Exam) and one other issue. I had met a young lady from Japan, and we desired to get married. In order to be admitted to the seminary, my wife would have to convert to Christianity, and become a Lutheran, something that she was and still is unwilling to do. I had to make a difficult choice, my wife or the seminary. I chose the

wife, and for a long time I had always wondered if I had made the correct choice. I had always believed that God had a plan and purpose for me, I just didn't know what it was. Fast forward to 2015, when Pastor Matt and I discussed the idea of me studying to become a Licensed Lay Deacon. I wondered if this would be an issue, but Pastor Matt found out that from President Linnemann that it would not be a disqualifier. This was a way that I could still serve, under the supervision of a Pastor, but I could put those skills to good use. After some debate, The congregation agreed at that time to call me to study as a Licensed Lay Deacon and in 2016, I began that 18-month journey of study. By the time I finished, Pastor Matt had taken another call and Pastor Eilers was serving as our intentional interim. The focus was on calling a new Pastor, which turned out to be John Luther. Pastor Luther had experience in supervising Deacons and immediately started putting me in front of the congregation, much more than I had done under Pastor Eilers. Some folks questioned it at the time, but after Pastor Luther left, I think we are all glad he did. Looking back, I can see now that even though I have these thorns in my side, God was leading me through it the whole time. God wanted me here in this place and role in order to lead us through this challenging time. God knows we have a shortage of seminary Pastors, but still provides. Had I gone onto seminary, I don't know where I would have ended up, and Faith may have really struggled during these last 18-months. I still believe that without me the congregation would have still held together but having regular worship services would have been more challenging. I'll never know this side of heaven the full impact of my ministry here over the last 18 months, but that's ok. God was in the drivers' seat. I was just along for the ride. It has been both an honor to serve you, but also a challenge. I know I've grown, but so have you.

So how about you? I know many of you have some kind of thorn in your side too. I know this vacancy and the pandemic have taken its toll on you. I know there are other challenges in your lives too, but I still believe that God has something special in store for each and every one of you. He has a purpose for your life. It may not always seem obvious, but I see God working through you.

I can really see the truth in Paul's statement that when we are weak, we are strong. This last 18 months have rocked us to our core, and some believe have threatened our very existence as a congregation. I don't know if I would go that far, but I do know that we were beat up pretty bad, but out of those challenges, you rose to the occasion. We immediately transitioned to online services, ensuring God's Word went out during a very dark time. We were one of the first congregations to re-open, and we did so safely. There was a huge

outpouring of love for each other and for those who came off the street. I don't boast in myself, but I do boast in the Lord. It was all God all along. He made us stronger, and He will continue to do so. Have we sinned as a congregation, making mistakes along the way? Absolutely. Jesus died for those, and God forgives us of those sins.

As we prepare to install Pastor Greg on July 18<sup>th</sup>, I am excited to see what God has in store for us under Pastor Greg's leadership. Yes, we will have thorns in our side. We will personally have those thorns. Our congregation will have those thorns, as will our nation. But Paul's words still ring true today, just as they did back in the mid 60's AD.

*<sup>9</sup>But [God] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup>For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

In Jesus name,

Amen.

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