

“Sufficient Grace”
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
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14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 5, 2009

Reading Paul it doesn't take long to get the idea that the early church didn't think of itself as a great model to be followed. There are huge fights over personalities and money, class disputes, sexual improprieties, and doctrinal slugfests. People steal from each other, gossip about each other, and call each other names. Paul always seems to be at the center of these battles. In every church that he starts he finds himself competing with teachers who slip in the moment he slips out. Factions develop in congregations behind strong personalities. Superapostles, or followers of Apollos or followers of Cephas. Judaizers and gnostics. In just about every letter Paul has to defend his own perspective, his own view, his own authority, which is probably why he sounds like he's got a chip on his shoulder all the time. Something to prove.

Spiritual experiences aren't important he says, but then he knows a certain person – whose spiritual experience was more incredible than any other. It's clear that Paul is talking about himself (but then he wouldn't want to brag.) He wouldn't want us to think too highly of him, he says, even though the revelations were exceptional. It's annoying. I'd rather Paul just come right out and say “look people – I've got more credentials than these other losers you've been listening to. I'm smarter, I'm more experienced, and I've reached the highest spiritual plane. I've been with you from the beginning so nobody else has a right to contradict the direction that I think this congregation ought to follow.

That's the way we normally credential people in our world. We look at their experience. We look at their achievements. We look at their accomplishments. Past performance is a pretty good indicator of things of come. That's why we pay attention to bottom lines – to batting averages and hours billed; to growth percentages and sales increases; to GPAs and degrees earned. And Paul knows it. That's why, despite his best efforts not to boast, he can't help but emit a few credentials here and there. He can't help but let a few credentials fly because he's afraid that he might not be enough to convince people that his way is the right way. His appeals alone are enough to convince people that his vision is the right one. His words alone are not enough to lead others in the path that he things is the right. If Paul felt his way was being accepted at face value then he wouldn't have to work so hard to make the case for why the people in Corinth ought to heed it.

Despite his back-handed boasting, I don't think Paul believes that all these credentials are helpful to followers of Jesus Christ. That's why he comes across as so conflicted. He doesn't believe these credentials are any basis for authority in the church and yet he knows that we live in a world that knows of no other way to establish authority.

They are no basis for authority in the church because the more personal achievement you accrue; the more you are complemented for your spiritual superiority, the more you are convinced of your own spiritual achievement, the farther you become removed from the raw needs of the world. And the farther you become removed from the raw needs of the world, the farther away you are from Christ who can always be found among the suffering, always be found among the hurting, always be found among those who cry out for justice.

Most of us would choose to isolate ourselves from some of the more unpleasant aspects of this world – many of us already do. We isolate ourselves by the neighborhoods we live in, the company that we keep, the people and places we avoid. That isolation is made possible by the privilege that we accrue. The more privilege, the more choices we have to turn away from suffering.

Paul believed that Christians who appealed to their credentials for authority had it all backward. Authority in the church must be measured by proximity to Christ. And Christ is always found among weakness, amid suffering, in more than just one's own isolated personal experience, one's own personal achievement. Christ comes to visit where there is need.

Yet I often wonder if, for many of us in this congregation, neediness is more easily recognized in others than it is in ourselves. It's easy to recognize need among the hungry, the homeless, the sick, those who are in prison. It's easy to recognize need among those who suffer injustice because of an aspect of their humanity different than our own. It's easy to recognize need among those who suffer under heavy-handed regime, under the scourge of poverty, the evil of war.

I wonder if we are less open to recognizing neediness in ourselves. Paul admits his own weakness, something that presumably was so obvious to the Corinthians that he didn't need to elaborate on it. Scholars have hypothesized a physical or mental disability, a chronic disease, or a speech impediment. Whatever it was, Paul counts this suffering not as something given by God – God does not want us to suffer – but as the arena where God's grace might be received. The arena where God's grace might be known. The arena where his own weakness might be met with God's grace.

“So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may dwell in me,” Paul says. “I have weaknesses” is not usually the first thing one should mention in a job interview. Perhaps this is why Paul had to work slowly to the climax of his point. It's hard to convince a community of people who are so used to living in a world that judges everyone by their credentials, by their achievements, that weakness really is something to boast about. And yet anyone who has ever been loved by another; or anyone who has ever loved another, which is to say, seen someone as God sees each of us, knows that weakness, failure, and disappointment provide the context for grace to be received. “My grace is sufficient for you,” says the Lord, “for power is made perfect in weakness.”

That's good news to me as a pastor, a husband, a father, and a human being. After thirteen years of marriage, Lord knows (and Kate knows, too) I have many weaknesses as a partner. Still trying to figure out what it means to love two daughters into adulthood, I am

acutely aware of mistakes I've already made and I will make many more. Coming up on five years of service as your pastor, you all, no doubt, know more than ever the specifics of my weaknesses. I know that I do not possess all the gifts that I wish that I had. I know I've made some mistakes. They won't be the last ones.

Yet I am reassured to know that the occasion and the knowledge of my weaknesses is no cause for fear – it is the arena where God's grace is most palpable, and most available. It is the place where I meet Christ. "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Paul believed that grace came in the presence of community – in that place where, in the course of growing together, weaknesses can no longer be hidden from one another. Disappointments cannot be masked. Difficulties cannot be papered over. There, where two or more people are gathered together in Christ's name, there is where grace comes to meet us.

Last year, on November 6, my good friends Chris and Carrie Tuttle found out just what it means to have your weaknesses trotted out on display. Chris took his nine month old son in for a routine checkup with their pediatrician. The doctor heard something that didn't sound right. Off they went for some tests. Twenty-four hours later they were told their son's heart had a fatal flaw. He wouldn't make it.

To make matters worse, they were in the middle of a move from the church where Chris had been pastor to a new church in a different city; from Carrie's job at another church transitioning to full time at home with their two children. Less than a month later, their son had a seizure and was rushed to the hospital and put on life support. The months of time they thought they had with their son - now reduced to days.

Yet during all of this time, it was the church that sprang into action. Members of Chris' former church cleaned out their old home. Members of Carrie's former church packed the attic. And members of their new church began cooking meals, baby-sitting daughter, and lining up the right doctors at Duke Hospital. Ten days after being on life support, their son had a new heart.

And Chris said, "you know that cliché 'God won't give you more than you can handle?' It's ridiculous. There's no way we could handle this alone, and we still can't. But this community can."

This community of Christians who are not afraid of their weaknesses. Who are not afraid of insults, hardship, persecution, or calamities; who are not afraid because we know that where there is suffering, where there is hardship, where there is injustice around us and within us, too, there Christ will be found – offering forgiveness, working healing, announcing grace. Grace that is sufficient for you and me. Grace that makes "us" possible.