

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost • July 5, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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2 Corinthians 12:2-10

“Walking by Faith: Walking in Weakness”

A belated happy Fourth of July to you! Did you see any of the fireworks last night? Here in D.C., up in New York, all around the country, we celebrated with friends and strangers as we watched these amazing explosions in the sky. We Americans really know how to throw a birthday party for our nation, don't we? We blow stuff *up*! These fireworks never cease to amaze me: starbursts and patterns, candy-store rainbows of colors popping out against the black canvas of the night sky. Our fireworks from downtown, traditionally accompanied by the National Symphony Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture," ends in a huge finale: explosions in the sky! cannon fire! clouds of smoke! Our Independence Day parties embody a genuinely American attitude: "Go big or go home." Due to economic cutbacks, a number of municipalities had to cancel fireworks shows this year – though, by and large, people have understood the need for the cutbacks. But sparklers, though pretty, aren't enough to really get the job done when you're looking to fete the freedom we enjoy here, are they? We like big, powerful displays of pyrotechnic majesty. Anything less seems, well, weak. And weakness, as we know, is bad. It's less than ideal, less than what we'd want to see. Weakness in many ways just seems so un-American.

It's almost as if the apostle Paul were writing to us and not just the church in Corinth. In these last few chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul is comparing his identity as an apostle, one sent by Jesus, with other teachers who have been stirring up the believers with another gospel. These people seemed to have external evidence to merit their legitimacy: big, powerful speeches and attractive physical presence that people like to see in their leaders and teachers. Apparently, these people were pretty impressive. Paul even goes so far as to use the mocking term "super-apostles" to describe these false teachers who were presenting "another Jesus" and a "different gospel" (2 Cor. 11:4). They had used their polished speaking and trappings of success to bolster their message, leading Christians off course.

Now, Paul has grounds for his own testimony. He, too, has a compelling personal story. We know that people respond to a compelling personal story, but Paul doesn't want to use that as a basis for his apostleship. He even goes so far as to recount a big, powerful experience that he'd had fourteen years prior, yet he distances himself from it by talking about himself in the third person. Imagine for a moment how many more Corinthian believers Paul might have won if he'd more prominently featured this heavenly revelation as a testimony to his authority as one sent by Jesus himself. The things that he'd seen and heard could outshine even the greatest fireworks display! But Paul does not want anyone to think more of him than what they see in him or hear from him. Showcasing the big, powerful stuff is not Paul's way, for it is not Jesus' way.

Paul reports that he had pleaded with the Lord to remove "a thorn ... in the flesh," a weakness that the apostle suffered. Though we don't know the exact nature of this thorn, we know that it was a source of some suffering for Paul. But Paul no longer asks for it to be taken away because he has received his answer. Jesus tells him, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" But what is Jesus' power? For us, for the people of Corinth, and for Paul, Jesus' power to us is his saving love. This is the love that took him to the cross to die for our sake. This is the power that we need. It doesn't matter if we're big, powerful people, or if we command beautiful speech or possess a persuasive presence – we need it. And though we often pride ourselves on our independence, even Americans are in need of Jesus' saving power: power to forgive, power to heal the brokenness in our lives, especially when we are weak. That's where our witness, where Paul's

witness, must be founded. We don't bear witness to our own strength and power, but to Christ's saving power at work in our weakness.

We know weakness. Even now, we have some people from our congregation who are in and out of the hospital, contending with various illnesses. In visiting and talking with these people, I've seen how God's grace can be at work even in the midst of weakness. These Christians give witness to the people around them as they face the reality of "thorns in the flesh" in their lives. The bystanders see their response, not in despair, but in hope, in the knowledge that God is with them in the things of this life. He is with them – with us – even as the things of this life pass away. God's power, His saving love, shines through our lives. It's at work even in our handicaps. I know that the word "handicap" is frowned up in America (unless you're talking about golf), but these things exist. They might set us back physically, mentally, psychologically; however, these conditions are just that – conditions. Jesus' grace is still active. God overcomes our handicaps and still gives us what we do not deserve: His saving love.

As we walk in weakness in this life, we can rest assured that Christ is our strength, fully relying on God's grace to see us through. In our Vacation Bible School, this week, we'll be sharing the message of God's love with about a hundred children from our community. This summer's theme, "Gadget's Garage," centers on the truth that **God's Always Doing Great, Exciting Things**, that Jesus makes all things new. In our weakness, we can take hope in that truth. In our worship services this weekend, all those who will be working together in VBS this week will be commissioned. God will be working in each of these people in the days ahead, making His grace known to the young children that will gather here – not because these people are "super-teachers" without any weakness, but because of His love for *all* His children.

As we walk by faith in this world, we Christians give witness to God's love, not through our strength, by how big and powerful or important we are, but by how He works through our weakness. This is a pretty counter-cultural attitude for us as Americans. In these United States, we prize our *in*dependence, not our *de*pendence. But as Christians, we look to our Lord to work through us. We realize that He is the one who guides us, who guards us. We don't go it alone, self-sufficient, independent. And we share the message of God's power, His grace, His saving love, not because of our greatness, our power, the things *we* have done, but because of the things that He has done – and still does – in our lives, even in our weakness.

This Fourth of July weekend, as we walk by faith, let us give thanks to our God, whose grace is sufficient for us, whose power is made perfect in weakness.

Amen.