

“EMBRACING THE IMPERFECT”

2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

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I have problems with the apostle Paul. When I read Paul’s letters, I grit my teeth against his misogyny. I shake my head at the denseness of his theology, how much work it is to understand him. I am alternately amused and infuriated that when he’s on shaky ground theologically, he becomes bombastic and disorganized. Sometimes I just don’t understand him at all. Other times I wish I didn’t understand him because I don’t agree with him. And then in moments, he stuns me with his brilliance and insight. You can’t dismiss Paul and his writings. They are too much a part of the church and its history and self-understanding. And you have to admire the man. He had one vision, one moment of being somehow confronted with a sense of the crucified and risen Christ, and he threw over everything he had been, and became a tireless and obviously effective evangelist for a savior of the world he never met in person. Paul is without a doubt a super-apostle. But he’s a difficult character to understand, more difficult still to get cozy with.

Take this morning’s reading from 2 Corinthians. It begins with Paul relating a kind of ecstatic spiritual experience that’s not generally part of our religious lexicon. And then it goes on with Paul in some ways at his worst: confrontational, disorganized, alternately self-aggrandizing and self-effacing. And then at the end, he speaks of weakness and of power in a voice so profound that you have to pay attention and think.

He’s made me think a lot this week, and I realized first of all that the church has done him a terrible disservice. Paul did not write general theological tracts, writings intended to be enshrined for the ages. He wrote occasional letters—letters to specific communities for specific reasons. Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians is directed to a church Paul founded, a church he loved, a church in conflict, with one faction and another claiming spiritual superiority and the right to lead from that position of superiority. Paul writes to these people he loved and labored alongside. He writes to them personally, intimately, and yes, intemperately. But the church (with a capital “C”) has taken his words, as it has all of Paul’s writings that we know of, and claimed them to be Holy Writ, something Paul never would have sought; and then, even more interestingly, the church has decided that because these writings are scripture, are holy, then we should approach them with an expectation of perfection. Isn’t that interesting? Where do we get the idea that holiness equals perfection. It’s certainly not from our Bible. The Christian Bible abounds with stories about deeply flawed and sometimes damaged people approaching their faith both well and not so well, understanding God deeply at times and not at all at others. Paul, we have to see, is just another one of these people; and when we read his letters expecting perfection, expecting him to be good and helpful and insightful all of the time, we do him a disservice. And he would say, as much as it is a disservice to him, more importantly, when we read in that way, we do God and the most basic theology of our faith an even greater disservice.

The center of Christian faith is not about human perfection. It's never about leading from strength. It's never about power springing from our competencies. Authentic Christian theology has no truck with the cult of accomplishment, and everything to do with the power of brokenness, the tenderness of imperfection, knowing ourselves partial, wounded, and sometimes pitifully unable, and yet, by the power of God, able to be leaders and mystics, prophets, priests, and ministers to one another nonetheless.

Paul had some kind of profound disability. It has been diagnosed by biblical detectives over time as epilepsy, a speech impediment, Parkinson's disease, even leprosy. Whatever it was, Paul hated it. He called it a thorn or splinter in his flesh, always chafing, always painful, embarrassing, debilitating, something he prayed to God to remove. But God didn't remove it. And Paul, despite the fact that he was no media image of a great communicator, Paul became a great servant of God. The combination of his weakness and his power gave him a clear insight into God's foolish insistence that it is not our perfection but rather our humanity, our fragility, the things that hurt us and the things we cannot do that can become the center of our real power and authority, both in the church and in the world.

God's power is made perfect in our weakness. This is the truth Paul sees, but it is not a message that his culture or ours embraces. In fact, how many times a day are we told otherwise? It is hundreds of times in any given day, here as in ancient Corinth, we are given the message that our value and our power are dependant on reaching for perfection: having perfect bodies, attaining certain benchmarks, succeeding, accomplishing, being strong, decisive, able, and correct. But is that true? Is that really true? Accomplishment and perfection are a way into certain kinds of power. But spiritual power is different. I had a good friend in Duluth, named Lynne, who had a son born with multiple disabilities. Out of that experience, she founded an organization called "Pilot Parents" that now has chapters in seven states, helping families with special needs children. It was not her perfection that took her there, but her pain, the brokenness of her family's experience with Jeffrey. I was at Yale with the brother of a man wrongfully imprisoned on death row. Out of the hell of that experience, Mark became an attorney who has fought and fought against the death penalty all of his life. What is it that makes us reach out to one another? What teaches us the qualities of humility, compassion, empathy, hospitality, and openness to God? It's not our perfection that opens us to such qualities, but our experience of imperfection.

The Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen, some 40 years ago now wrote a classic work of pastoral theology called *The Wounded Healer*. In that book, he asserted directly that it is in the very places where we experience ourselves wounded, hurt, unable, that we are given the power to minister to others, to effect their healing as well as our transformation.

We all see ourselves, know ourselves as less than perfect. And for many of us that lack of perfection makes us hesitant about who we are before God. We are stuck in the connection between holiness and perfection, which we have to see is a worldly connection, not a Godly connection. In fact, what we learn from our Bible, what we learn from Paul, what we learn from God, is that holiness is more correctly imperfection sanctified. Look at the Bible. Who are the great champions of God? They are younger sons and prostitutes, striplings and liars, effete men and pushy women, adulterers, cheaters, not-too-bright disciples, and an evangelist who couldn't get his mouth around a single sentence without spitting. All of them were holy. All of them belonged to God. Just as we are holy and we belong to God,

because holiness, holiness is God's consent to dwell among us just as we are: flawed and broken, irritating and imperfect. God will dwell among us anyway, and if there is one testimony repeated over and over as the promise of God through God's people, it is that God both can and will make something strong and beautiful and more powerful than human power out of human inability, out of human suffering, even out of death.

So you, like me, should give Paul a break. He didn't get it perfect all the time, and God didn't expect him to, so we shouldn't either. Expect less of Paul and more of yourself. Sometimes I think we hold our inabilities in front of us as a shield, to protect us from having to make as much of ourselves as God would have us be. We are God's holy people. And God is with us, especially—especially where we are weak, hurt, unable. So we should look for and pray for in ourselves a courage that embraces our pain and inability—unhappy childhoods, body parts that don't work, failed relationships, our experiences of sorrow and loss—what we pray for is that out of all that, specifically from those sources, God will create in us that which is strong and beautiful, giving and powerful. The center of our faith is a failed hero, betrayed, abandoned, put to death. And you know what happened after that. God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. Holiness is not about perfection, but imperfection sanctified. For that above all else, thanks be to God. Amen.