

Saugatuck Congregational Church

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Strength made out of weakness

2 Corinthians 12 vs. 1-10

Isaiah 57 vs. 14-21.

John asked for a copy of my sermon. I had written it the old fashioned way using a pen (some of you will be too young to remember this instrument!) and so it is not stored in any drive of any computer. Before such drives were invented and then backed up and stored we had to use our memory - the original and best back up! So here goes ..

Paul asked God to take away the terrible thorn in his flesh whatever illness that was. Three times he asked and three times he was refused. The answer?

“My grace is enough for you.” The gift he received was free unconditional love. Nigel Mumford the Director of the Spiritual Life Healing Center in Greenwich New York calls grace “divine energy working in the soul.” No matter our circumstances God offers each of us this energy, his energy working wonderfully at the heart of our lives. Perhaps the cure we asked for may not occur but we will always be healed.

Then God goes on to say something else to Paul. “For my power is made perfect in weakness.” Now this is a much more difficult and complex text. I don’t for a minute pretend to understand it. But that’s why we pray and wrestle with God and spend time in meditation. To struggle with such texts. God says to Paul that he can use the thorn in the flesh to perfect his power. But he does not heal him. Jesus often said to the crowds who followed him “in order that you may know the power of God get up and be well.” Then he healed them. God’s Kingdom in that moment came very close. But here Paul is not healed but God insists that he will now use that weakness for his powerful purposes.

By now the BBC documentary is out and I have shared the DVD copy with Susanna and John. As you watch this you will see a little 12 year old girl

called Annabella in Kabale Uganda struggling with the thorn in her flesh which is HIV/AIDS, malaria and poverty. She survives childhood but only just. How can we say that God is using her weakness to perfect his power? As you watch the film please reflect on weakness in your own life and circumstances or in the life of someone you care very much about. This could be ill health, or infirmity as age creeps up, or a broken relationship, or unemployment. Whatever it is please reflect on it as you watch the film.

Now what is our text saying? In the death of Jesus we see utter weakness, utter hopelessness and the desertion of his disciples. The end. But God takes the end and offers a surprising beginning. He takes that sad and hopeless situation to reveal his perfect power in the resurrection of Jesus so that within a short time he is eating broiled fish and unleavened bread beside the Sea of Galilee with the disciples. As the father of the lost son said “he was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found.” Party time. Somehow we need to apply that to the weak situations in our lives and in the life of little Annabella. She was in Kampala recently and doing well. She saw her film for the first time and smiled.

Hold on to grace, be surrounded by grace, let your whole life be permeated by grace. It’s more than enough for you today and every day.

God is surely saying to Paul and to each of us that we should not compare the results we expect with what God actually wants for each of us and his world. Of course like Paul we must pray for healing. We must pray and work for a better life for little Annabella. But we need the depth the spiritual insight of Jesus to understand some of the amazing results, surprising results. When we do this we will be continually surprised. Practice that surprise each day.

Amen.