

Pentecost +6

Re-Turning to the Cross and Resurrection

July 4, 2021

Ezekiel 2:1-7, Psalm 123, 2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-6

Facing our own weaknesses or limitations can be frustrating, discouraging. If you look back on your own life, you may see times where you had to face weaknesses. There maybe things that you could have done in the past that you can't do now. There are a variety of different ways we come up against our own limitations. In today's texts, we have three stories of weaknesses.

When I was in high school and college, I always liked performing. I performed as magician and in theater. In college, I started an improv team at the church. We performed in churches and even on college campuses. Many things I had tried were successful, so I had high expectations and all sorts of visions and dreams the future. This continued even after Kelly and I got married. I had lots of expectation of things Kelly and I would do. For instance, I envisioned buying thousands of acres for a retreat ministry that I hoped to start.

After serving with several ministries, we started a house church that would become the community which hosted retreats. The goal was that I would eventually purchase land and have a permanent retreat location.

I started leading multiple retreats a year. This was kind of my dream. I thought I would do it the rest of my life, and it would gradually expand.

At the same time, I was struggling with a lifelong kidney disease. My only kidney started getting weaker, and I started having problems. When I'd teach, my ankles would start swelling. I'd be exhausted through retreats.

My kidney doctor gradually began increasing medications. Soon, I started feeling dizzy and weak. The doctor said I was developing anemia due to my weak kidney. I took iron but that didn't help. Then I started injecting Vitamin B into my stomach to help with the iron intake. Eventually, I was receiving iron infusions. In spite of that, my arms turn black and blue with bruises. Each time I went back to the doctor it would be a new problem and a new medication. Eventually, the doctor said, "I hate to tell you, but now you have diabetes."

Though I was a dreamer, I had come face to face with my limitations. I didn't even know if I would be able to continue ministry during that time. When I taught in our group, I couldn't really stand up very well. I'd get so weak and tired. It did feel almost like I was dying. It brought me to an awareness that there's a lot of things I thought I had do in life that I'd probably never do. Physically I was weak. I was losing my capacity to dream, to hope.

During that time I thought about a quote that Thomas Merton had written that stood out to me in graduate school. He is writing about the person who comes to realize that he is not as great as he once thought. Merton writes,

“He has planned to do spectacular things. He cannot conceive himself without a halo. And when the events of his daily life keep reminding him of his own insignificance and mediocrity, he is ashamed, and his pride refuses to swallow a truth at which no sane man should be surprised.”¹

In the same essay, Merton highlights the gift of weakness as a gift of forgetting ourselves, saying,

“When humility delivers a man from attachment to his own works and his own reputation, he discovers that perfect joy is possible only when we have completely forgotten ourselves. And it is only when we pay no more attention to our own deeds and our own reputation and our own excellence that we are at last completely free to serve God in perfection for His own sake alone.”²

During that time of struggle with weakness, I turned to First and Second Corinthians and Paul’s discussion about the cross and about weakness. I even ended up leading a retreat on weakness. I was learning the gift of suffering and weakness. I was learning the mystery of God’s life poured out in the cross and our identification with the cross in our own lives.

I am still learning the wisdom and glory of God in the weakness of the cross. All of us face various kinds of weakness in physical, mental, and financial limitations. Actually, it's in these times that we often come with a greater awareness of our dependency upon God's grace.

Today we are presented with three stories of weakness. Ezekiel is called to prophecy to a rebellious people. His message and behavior look weak in the powerful world of Babylon. Paul writes to people who focus on strength and gifts and focuses on his own weakness. Jesus goes home and is not trusted or celebrated but only questioned and mocked.

Let us pause over these stories of weakness in a world that celebrates strength.

1. Ezekiel preaching to thorns and scorpions
2. Paul glorying in his own weakness
3. Jesus facing rejection from His own community

1. Ezekiel Preaching to Nettles and Scorpions

Ezekiel is a priest. He's born to be a priest. To be born to be a priest in Israel would mean to be born in a priestly family, so from his birth, he's been preparing to assume his role as a priest. He'd be preparing to serve in the temple. He would be preparing to be lead worship in the temple. But as a teenager, Ezekiel is taken captive and led away to Babylon. He's part of that first

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Abbey of Gethsemani, Inc. (1961), p. 60.

² Merton, 59.

group of people that are taken captive and led to Babylon. The way the story goes, he will never actually serve the temple, because he's not going to go back and the temple will eventually be destroyed. So Ezekiel's whole life purpose has been thwarted, so to speak.

Ezekiel sits in exile. Then the glory of God from the Temple comes to Him. He beholds unimaginable visions of glory and power. A voice commands, "Stand up and I will speak with you." The wind of the Spirit washes over him and lifts up to His feet.

Ezekiel is commissioned to speak people of Israel, the nation of rebels, who are stretched all across the empire. The poor remain in the land of the Israel and the rest of the people have been blown to the four winds, captured and taken away. The passage speaks of them as an alien and rebellious people and not as the people of God.

Though called by God, rescued from slavery in Egypt, and led into the freedom of the promised land, this people have resisted their God, trusting the power of the nations. Yes they followed the Temple rituals, but they also sought protection from surrounding nations and trusted in the idols of the land. Their trust, their confidence was in created things, created people and not the Creator of all things. Now they've been blown to the four winds.

Ezekiel is called to address them with the very word of God. He will be given the Word of God to eat, and he will speak only what he has been given. Yet, this word will not be heard. The people will resist, refuse. Speaking to them will be like dwelling among briars and thorns and scorpions. Ezekiel's words will seem weak, will face resistance, will fall to the ground, and yet, he is called to speak.

Though they are hard and rebellious, the people will know a prophet has been among them. One day, Ezekiel's weakness will shine out in glory as the wind of the Spirit breathes through his Words and calls the dead house of Israel back to life. These words will raise up a new people who will one day hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and carry this news to the ends of the earth.

2. Paul Glorifying in His Own Weakness

When Paul enters Corinth, he enters a city that has been destroyed and is now rebuilt. Filled with people from every race and status, this city is growing in power and wealth. Everyone wants to enjoy the fruit of this booming rebuilt city. Strangers can come and grow healthy and powerful. It is a city of competition and striving and success with plenty of failures and broken lives scattered throughout.

Paul's Good News of Jesus Christ is received with open arms and soon a thriving church grows around this Good Word. But the pressures and competition and striving for status that saturate the city also consumes the church. The people are competing over spiritual wisdom, over beloved teachers, over personal experiences. The Good News is getting lost in the striving.

Paul tries to refocus this people around the cross of Christ, around the grace of God. But they even begin to judge Paul. He was good at the beginning but they are fast moving beyond his

wisdom. He is weaker than they hoped. Instead of flexing his spiritual muscles, Paul embraces this weakness and uses it to focus on the work of Christ in His cross and resurrection. Paul highlights his own weakness while pointing to the glory of God in Christ.

In Second Corinthians, he characterizes his own path of discipleship as a downward path. A path of ever growing weakness and ever increasing glory. Jesus must increase and we must decrease. In today's text, Paul goes so far as to say that God has given him weakness, a thorn that drives him to great dependence upon the life and power of Christ. He writes,

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. (2 Corinthians 12:10).

3. Jesus facing rejection from His own community

Jesus goes home. He enters the town of His youth and enters the synagogue to teach. As He teaches, the crowds are astonished. This is not a good astonishment such as, "He speaks with authority." Rather, we are given a series of questions buzzing through the crowd and these questions help us to get a sense of this astonishment. They begin asking amongst themselves:

"Where did this man get these things?

What is the wisdom given to him?

How are such mighty works done by his hands?

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And aren't his brothers and mother here with us?"

These are skeptical questions. He is just a carpenter, how could he know such things? Who taught him this and why is he acting above his station? Does he think he's better than us by coming here and teaching us. We know he grew up here and we know he was a carpenter. We know his family. Who does he think he is?

At the culmination of the questions our text makes sure we get the point, "And they took offense at him."

Jesus responds, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household." (Mark 6:4). Most were unreceptive, so he did little among them, but he did lay his hands on a few sick people and they were healed. Overall, Jesus marvels at their unbelief.

They are too familiar with him and as a result cannot really see or hear Him.

These three stories give us a picture of people whose action and words seem weak and unimpressive to their listeners. In each case, it could be that they are too familiar. The house of Israel believes they are God's chosen and cannot hear the words of a prophet who will expose their shame. They are living in captivity and yet, they are still blind to their utter wretchedness. They cannot see or hear.

They are hardened to his words and act like thorns and scorpions, but his words will eventually be heard. His words will eventually take root in the hearts of a remnant all across the empire. This remnant will rediscover hope in the faithfulness of God.

Paul seems behind the times. He has failed to understand the changing landscape, the competitive world of Corinth, the importance of speaking a relevant word. Many of the people want Paul to expand on his own supernatural experiences. They want Paul to demonstrate his rhetorical excellence. They want Paul to focus on the power of the Spirit and not his own weakness. Paul persists with the Gospel of Jesus Christ that is rooted in the way of the cross: in the way of death and life in Christ.

Jesus is simply too familiar to the people of his hometown, and they refuse to hear the Word of the Lord that echoes from His lips. They would rather be blind and deaf than humble themselves to hear this carpenter's son.

As we think about this, what is the Gospel message in this texts? It is coming to the awareness maybe of our own limitations. But simultaneously, the danger in become too familiar with the gospel. It's so easy to do in our own culture. Where the culture feels like it's already heard too much about the cross and resurrection of Christ. The cross is not central often in the teachings, even within the church.

We live in a world, in an age, in a culture where the cross and resurrection of Christ is too familiar. People gravitate toward the moral teaching of Jesus but are repelled by the claims of that all humans must stand before a Holy God. They are repelled by the particularity of the Gospel.

It is easy for the message of the cross and resurrection of Christ seem redundant. Some would prefer to deeper teaching. Some would long for a great focus on justice. Some would prefer to worship God instead of focusing on the cross. It is easy for the story of Christ to be reduced to an example for us to follow.

Teaching, worship, discipleship, and justice are all part of the Christian life but they are all inartistically linked to the cross and resurrection of Christ. The redeeming work of Christ is not simply a past event but a present power that sustains us and always points us to the Father. It is in the death and life of Christ, we come to discover the power of God made known to us by His Spirit.

The Lord will often speak to us in the place of weakness: a place of dependence. A place where our eyes are opened afresh to the truth. Facing our own weakness, our own limitation, we might rediscover our absolute dependence upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the source of all hope. There is no hope outside of this.

I would encourage us all to pause and reflect on the work of the cross. What is the cross of Christ? It is the action of God. It's a singular act, one-time act in history that encompasses all hopes of redemption. So it's the story of all human reconciliation of God. It's a one-time act of God. This action is made present to us even now by the work of the Holy Spirit.

The cross is also a revelation. In the death and resurrection of Christ, we come to behold the depth of the Father's love. Jesus reveals the Father. The cross reveals the self-offering of love between Jesus and the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The cross is also teaching us something about the very shape of all creation. The world is created to reflect this self-offering of love. This great exchange of love.

The cross is the pattern of Christian discipleship. Paul will point to the cross as a pattern of considering others greater than ourselves; pouring out our life on behalf of others. It is the shape of love.

The cross is also good news and great joy. There is much to be said about the joy inherent in the work of the cross. This is just the beginning of ways of meditating on the work of the cross we keep coming back to it. Keep rehearsing the story of God's love for us revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This week as I thought about the cross, I spent some time rereading old notes I had made from writers who've taught me about the cross. I will end with the words of Dumitru Staniloae,

"Only by the cross can we remain in submission to God and in true love towards our neighbors. We cannot purify or develop our own spiritual life, nor that of others, nor that of the world in general, by seeking to avoid the cross. Consequently, we do not discover either the depth or the greatness of the potential forces and powers of this world as a gift of God if we try to live without the cross. The way of the cross is the only way which leads upwards, the only way which carries creation towards the true heights for which it was made."³

³ Dumitru Staniloae, *The Victory of the Cross*, SLG Press (1970).