

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

July 5, 2009 Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

## Strength in Weakness

Do you know the story of how the flag went from 48 stars to 50 stars?

Robert Heft (67 yrs. old) was in high school back in 1958 in Lancaster, Ohio. He was a shy kid who always sat in the back of the class. He also had an interest in politics, and talk of Alaska and Hawaii becoming states prompted him to design a 50-star flag as a school project.

He knew nothing about sewing and his mother wouldn't help him because she feared her son's project would be desecrating the flag, Heft spent 12 1/2 hours one weekend arranging and sewing a new combination of stars.

"The thing is to add them (the stars) so no one can tell there is a change in the design," he said. Robert arranged the 50 stars in five rows of six stars alternating with four rows of five stars.

He turned it in and his teacher, Stanley Pratt, gave him a B minus. "He said it lacked originality," Robert said. "He said anybody could make the flag."

Pratt, however, said he would give Robert a higher grade if he could get Congress to accept the design.

Well, Robert took on the challenge and sent his flag to his congressman, Rep. Walter Moeller, who eventually got his design accepted. (His teacher did then give him an A.)

The 50 star flag is a story of a situation where what was seen in one perspective as a weakness, in fact became a strength.

That's what our scripture lesson is about today.

Paul, as you may remember, was a devout Jew who persecuted and killed Christians, until he had a profound religious experience where the risen Christ came to him and said, "Why do you persecute me?" He was blinded and over the next days had a number of religious encounters, which profoundly changed him. Paul became the most important proclaimer of Jesus Christ and leader in the early church. Most of the New Testament was written by him.

After Paul's unexpected ecstatic experience, something else happened that he had not expected or prayed for. A thorn in his flesh was given to him by "a messenger of Satan."

Scholars have poured oceans of ink into books and journals speculating about what the "thorn" was:

- Some think it was a physical disability or a mental illness.
- Some think he suffered from epilepsy or severe migraines.
- Some think it was a spiritual torment or chronic temptation he faced.

It really doesn't matter what it was – the Corinthians probably knew.

Twice Paul offers what to him is the obvious explanation for this: "To keep me from being too elated." Essentially to keep him humble.

What we do know is that Paul endured both physical and spiritual pain. And what does matter is that Paul, like us all, knew weakness.

And three times, he tells us, he prayed that this weakness, this affliction might be removed, that he might be cured, that his pain might be taken from him. But God answered that prayer as he answers so many prayers – he did not take the thing away, but gave Paul strength to bear it. That is how God works. He does not spare us things, but makes us able to conquer them.

There was a man in the Acton Church, where I served before coming here, who knew this truth. His name was Carl Gottlieb and he was diagnosed with MS in his early thirties. He had a family and a career as an engineer and the progress of the disease was slow. I knew him the last 10 years or so of his life when he was in his 50's and 60's and just before he died he spoke words of profound faith. "I have not been cured; but I have been healed."

Carl heard God's words to Paul as if they were spoken directly to him – and they were. God said, "My grace is sufficient for you - for my power is made perfect in weakness."

And Paul's response to this statement is remarkable:

"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses that Christ's power may rest on me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

#### WHEN I AM WEAK - THEN I AM STRONG

To the world this is crazy. Power and strength are what most people value and seek. Weakness is not placed high on the list of character traits we want to develop in ourselves or our children.

And the world teaches us to conceal our vulnerability, lest we be hurt; it teaches us to hide our weakness, lest we be taken advantage of,

The world teaches us to camouflage our inadequacies with self-confidence, self reliance and self assurance, so that we can build a heaven for ourselves here on earth.

The world teaches us that we can help ourselves, that we can do what we need to do on our own, and that all the answers we need we can find in ourselves.

And it might sound good, but it simply is not true. The wisdom of God is not the same as the wisdom of the world. God's will for our lives is not found in the messages we get from popular culture, Hollywood, or the latest business practices.

Our weaknesses, our hardships, and our tribulations are not of themselves a blessing, they are real problems for us, and they can create problems for how we interact with others and navigate the world,

But - when we acknowledge our weaknesses and our needs, and turn to God and ask for his help, instead of relying on our own skill & wisdom & strength to save us, then something profound

happens. We discover that God's grace is sufficient for us, and that his power is made perfect in our weakness, and almost always in ways we do not expect.

When I am weak, then I am strong.

The story goes about how a small boy was trying to lift a stone much too heavy for him. His father walked by and seeing his struggles said "Are you using all your strength?" The boy said that indeed he was. And the father replied "No son, you aren't, for you haven't asked me to help you."

How much haven't we asked God about? How much of our weakness do we keep locked up inside us, because we think that there is no help for us, or because we think that other things are more important?

A part of our strength, the greater part, comes from our relationship to God - God who is able and willing to help us. But first we must realize our need for him, and ask him to take control. Doing our best as Christians always includes asking God to help us do what we are striving to do.

God makes his power perfect in weakness, for it is there that he is able to do for us what we, in our strength, do not let him do.

God does not always change the circumstances we face. How we feel is no reliable indicator of God's presence with us. Stop and think about it, and maybe it's possible to believe that the power of God far surpasses the most demanding circumstances, and our best or worst feelings.

I would like to conclude with a poem that I know I've shared before in a sermon but it's worth repeating. It was written over a hundred years ago and found in the pocket of a deceased confederate soldier:

I asked for health that I might do greater things,  
I was given infirmity that I might do better things...  
I asked for riches that I might be happy,  
I was given poverty that I might be wise...  
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men,  
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God....  
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life,  
I was given life that I might enjoy all things...  
I got nothing that I asked for but everything that I hoped for.  
Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered.  
I am among all men most richly blessed.

And so are we. Amen.