

Sermon
6 Pentecost—9-B
St. Andrew's, Methuen
July 4, 2021
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Ezekiel 2:1-5
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

Throughout Church history there has been a lot more written about the Apostle Paul's teaching than about his mystical experiences. And this has created the illusion that the Christian life is more about having the right doctrine than having the right experience—which means many Christians today know **the map of the Realm of God**, but few have actually walked the territory where our consciousness is opened and guided by Spirit.

The modern mainline Church is like the patron who goes to a fine restaurant and **eats the menu and not the meal.**

Monk and spiritual writer Cyprian Consiglio, however, counsels the opposite approach: he says, "First, we! are looking for a mystical path, rather than merely doctrinal one, a path that transforms rather than one that simply calls for conforming." *Spirit, Soul, Body*, Page 65

So today let's pause to consider Paul's glimpse into one of his transforming experiences in Christ.

He writes: "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat."

This transcendent experience is very much like the Near-Death Experiences, NDEs, I've talked about several times. And along with his mystical encounter by the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road, he is transformed from a hyper-religious and violent persecutor of Christians, into a Spirit-filled and loving servant of the Church and the world.

Then he goes on to say, that one of the chief learnings of these experiences is not that they made him spiritually bulletproof, like Superman.

Rather, these experiences convince him that the sovereignty and grace of God are so profound that **Paul can be strong when he is weak.**

As he says, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; **for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.**"

Paul meets the power of Christ through his experiences of Christ, and is so transformed internally that he now trusts Christ enough to work through not just his gifts but also through his weaknesses.

Paul learns that having a "thorn in the flesh", **actually makes room in his consciousness for the power of Christ to manifest through him.**

A priest friend years ago said his parish always brought their prayer requests to him whenever he was feeling depressed, because they noticed his prayers for the sick were often more effective than when he was full of good cheer and health.

"I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me....for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Jesus uses this same spiritual principle when sending out the Twelve alone on their first missionary journey.

Jesus tells them to go without all those things they usually rely on to feel strong and safe. "He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; **no** bread, **no** bag, **no** money in their belts; but to wear sandals and **not** to put on two tunics.

I'm going to Atlanta and Raleigh a week from Monday to spend time with family—and I have a mental list of everything I'll need, but the really important things are my wallet, money, cell phone, laptop, Kindle—**and please God don't let me forget the charging cords!!!**

Here's the thing: Jesus wants them to disconnect from those things they think they need to feel secure, **so that they may experience the need to trust God for their security.**

Jesus is asking them to find their security in God's presence in the center of their being and in the generosity of others, instead of in their own skill or stuff.

This kind of faith in God is willing to live without controlling all situations and guaranteeing all outcomes.

Zen philosopher Alan Watts offers us this metaphor: Imagine when you are young you are kicked over an immense chasm and falling beside you is a big rock. On the way down you have two choices: you can cling anxiously to the rock, hoping it will save you, or you can let go of the rock and enjoy the ride. **The end is the same either way, but the quality of the trip is vastly different.**

This past year and a half of Covid has felt like being kicked over a chasm without our usual supports and many of us **found ourselves reaching out to God in new ways.**

And now on this 4th of July in “the land of the free and the home of the brave”, we hope we are heading toward normal life once again where we once again can trust our health, wealth, education and military power to make us strong and safe.

But I want to suggest we keep experimenting with Paul’s principle: “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me....for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

So that with the power of Christ in us, we can reach out to our neighbors and live out the heart of the Pledge of Allegiance where we promise to work for “liberty and justice”, not just for those who think and look like us, but for all—liberty and justice for all.

When the apostles return from their mission trip, they are jubilant, because they found that in giving up their material security blankets they were so filled with the power of God that Mark reported: **“They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”**

And in healing others the apostles have their own **profound spiritual experience:** They don’t just eat the menu; they enjoy the meal. They don’t just read the map; they walk the territory—**the territory of heaven on earth where when we are weak, then we are strong in Christ.**