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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost  
July 9, 2006

**2 Corinthians 12.2-10**  
Mark 6.1-13

### **Power in Weakness**

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” —2 Corinthians 12.9

There’s an old story that circulates among ministers (There are many of those!)...it’s about a church that was having a contentious debate about whether or not to put a costly addition onto its building. Going into the crucial congregational meeting, the group was evenly divided and nobody knew how the vote would come out...just that it would be close.

Near the end of the debate, an elderly and beloved member of the congregation stood up to speak. It took him a long time to stand up, and he teetered on his cane while he spoke, but he made an impassioned plea that the congregation must show hope for the future and trust in God and, therefore, must undertake the building program. After he spoke, he plunked down into his pew and, promptly, *died*. The vote was unanimous!

It is a bit of a “tall tale,” but that story does hint at something important: power does not always reside in the obvious places. In such a situation we might expect the pastor or the trustees to wield the decisive power. Or perhaps the largest pledger or wealthiest member. (Those two are almost never one and the same, by the way.) Or, maybe, the most politically astute member, who would be able to line up votes. But, instead, it is a tired old man who simply needs to say one last time that he loves his church.

Our text for the morning invites us to think more carefully than we are accustomed about the true meaning of power. Writing to the urbane, libertine, and contentious church in Corinth—people who knew worldly success and power—Paul wrote to proclaim a different way. The Corinthians were achievers and they tended to make even the spiritual life into a competition. In this letter, Paul seems to be addressing an issue within the church where some members considered themselves to be “super-apostles”<sup>1</sup> who deserved special status because of their extraordinary spiritual experiences.

To debunk their self-aggrandizing claims, Paul writes about “a person he knows,” and we get the idea he’s talking about himself, who has had amazing spiritual experiences, who was “caught up in the third heaven.” (12.2) But this person was also given an affliction, a “thorn in the flesh” (12.7) that has dogged him for many years. (Many theories have been advanced about what this thorn might have been: impiety, doubt, bad temper, epilepsy, obnoxious congregations. We won’t go into those theories today.) To his surprise, “this person” has found power in the affliction rather than in any spiritual virtuosity:

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, 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.

(2 Corinthians 12.8-10)

Paul gives us insights for a new kind of meditation on power. In our culture, we are so well schooled in certain indicators of power and approval that we barely notice how deeply they are ingrained. A quick glance at a car tells us something about the status of its owner. Corporations make all sorts of marketing assumptions simply by letting their computers sort on zip codes. I was at a business gathering recently and instantly recognized the person who was “the boss” when he walked into the room. What distinguished him? I don’t really know—his haircut, his suit, the way people treated him?

Like a good work of art, the Christian Gospel serves to subtly undermine all of our prevailing assumptions. At our Thursday night film series this past week we watched a movie about angels.<sup>2</sup> In the film, unlikely characters had spiritual power and likely characters had spiritual struggles. A frail old man who could barely climb the library steps held within him the wisdom and stories of the ages. Angels yearned for the world of human existence. A beautiful young woman longed for love. Young children could recognize the presence of angels when

adults were clueless. In the realm of the spirit, appearances do not matter. The usual markers of success and failure are useless.

Even though we don't do it naturally or habitually, I don't think it is that hard for us to apply this sort of new thinking about power to our daily lives. I doubt that there is anyone here this morning who hasn't learned something important or grown in some unexpected way when faced with an affliction in life—with a “thorn in the flesh.” An experience of grief can lead to new independence and confidence, even in the midst of pain. An illness can increase our sense of empathy for others. A moral lapse can help us to be less judgmental. We never know the lessons that life will teach us.

Last summer I had the opportunity to hear Travis Roy speak in connection with the big junior golf tournament that was held in Longmeadow. I know that his story is familiar to many here, since the whole town was encouraged to read his book a few years ago.<sup>3</sup> Travis was a promising young hockey player whose hockey career ended 11 seconds into his first college game, when he went on the ice for Boston University. He was injured and since then has been paralyzed from the neck down. But up from the horror of that injury has arisen a sense of courage and purpose that is truly powerful. I watched the faces of young golfers from around the country as they listened to him speak. It was perfectly quiet and he had their full attention. It was remarkable.

“For whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” There are institutional applications, as well, for this new way of thinking. Two weeks ago I spoke in my sermon about the plight of the mainline churches in America. I suggested that we are tempted to cry out with the disciples who were in a wave-swamped boat with Jesus, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mark 4.38) I know that it was a hard sermon for some of you to hear. I know, because it was hard for me to preach. For those of us who love the church and have a lifetime of participation and commitment, it is difficult to witness a gradual, but steady, institutional decline. But as with personal setbacks, this mainline “thorn in the flesh” can become an opportunity for spiritual renewal. When we can no longer relax in a comfortable cultural situation where we are widely-respected and oft-consulted, then perhaps we can return to the Gospel

message that promises good news for the captives and recovery of sight to those who are blind. Our affliction can, if we open ourselves in new ways, become the source of power in weakness.

God has given us the capacity for success in life and for the achievement of worldly goals. That capacity is a gift from God, but it is not God's only gift. I've found Karl Barth to be helpful in this:

For when [we stand] in the service of God, [we] must be able, sometimes, and perhaps for long periods, to be still, to wait, to keep silence, to suffer and therefore to be without the other kind of capacity. This, too, is power... the power of the Lamb as well as the Lion, of the cross as well as the resurrection, of humiliation as well as exaltation, of death as well as life....The power which comes from [God] is the capacity to be high or low, rich or poor, wise or foolish. It is the capacity for success or failure, for moving with the current or against it, for standing in the ranks or for solitariness. For some it will almost always be only the one, for others only the other, but usually it will be both for all of us in rapid alteration. In each case however, it will be true capacity, the good gift of God, ascribed to each as needed in [God's] service.<sup>4</sup>

These aren't easy things to understand—not because they are intellectually challenging, but because our Christian teachings run so counter to what the world teaches us about success and power. “Whenever I am weak, I am strong,” Paul said. His weakness made room for God to be at work in his life. So can ours.

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<sup>1</sup> See 2 Corinthians 11.5 and 12.11.

<sup>2</sup> *Wings of Desire* (1987), directed by Wim Wenders. (German, French, and English, with English subtitles.)

<sup>3</sup> Travis Roy with E.M. Swift, *Eleven Seconds: A Story of Tragedy, Courage, & Triumph* (Warner Books, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, p. 742.