

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
7/5/2015, Pentecost 6B, Lectionary 14
The Lonesome Road

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning's Epistle Lesson, St. Paul ends his testimony with these words:

...for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10,
RSV)

The apostle knew that of which he wrote. He knew what it meant to be weak. In fact, he seems to have been so unimpressive in certain ways, that his opponents dismissed him as a loser. St. Paul admits that they put him down:

For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." (2 Corinthians 10:10, NRSV)

I guess St. Paul was of slight build – his "bodily presence is weak." And in an age that especially valued rhetoric and oratory, St. Paul's speech, they said, was "contemptible." Believe me, these are words that hurt the feelings of a preacher.

But St. Paul does not give up. He admits that he is weak, but goes on to say that, for the sake of Christ, he does not mind being weak. And so we come to his mysterious saying – the one I want to explore this morning:

...for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10,
RSV)

There are various ways to interpret this saying, and in this sermon I mean to linger with some of these interpretations. I think we learn something from each one. Here are the possible meanings I have in mind – three of them. When St. Paul says that "when I am weak, then I am strong," he could mean:

- 1) Even weak and insignificant Christians can do important work for Christ. I think this meaning is true and important for many of us, even for the most humble of us.
- 2) The apostle could mean that the strong need not apply: Christ only wants weak people to help build his kingdom. I bet you can anticipate that I think this meaning is wrong. Christ's church has always benefited from strong and gifted members. The more the better. And if you calmly and accurately recognize about yourself that you have strengths and gifts, then I urge you to use them also in the church.
- 3) A third meaning is a call to faithful endurance. Here, the emphasis on weakness shifts a little. In the first point, I want to say that Christ can use the

work of *all* Christians, even the weak ones. Here we come to a more radical claim: that Christ can use us precisely when and because we are weak – that we are somehow at our best when we seem most down and out. I think this meaning is true too. In fact, it is very much on my heart, and on the heart of many pastors who visit the sick.

... THOUGH WE BE WEAK

So, let's begin with the first point: We can do important work for Christ even if we be weak and insignificant people.

It is one thing to walk down a long and lonesome road if you consider yourself to be strong. It is something very different to walk that lonesome road if you know yourself to be weak. If you are mighty Samson strolling down that road, you do not care if the lion comes rushing upon you. You know you can handle that lion. You've done it before (Judges 14:5-6). But if you are a mere wayfarer on the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and robbers fall upon you, they might well beat you terribly, steal from you, and leave you half dead (Luke 10). Many of us are more like the poor wayfarer than like mighty Samson. We know ourselves to be ordinary men and women, boys and girls. We might even know ourselves to be among the weak and unimpressive ones of this earth. If so, then be pleased to know that Christ can use you nonetheless. Indeed, he is glad to use you. His cause depends on the weak and the insignificant.

Nowadays I find myself imagining and sympathizing with the clergy back in the days of the Arian controversy in the church, in the mid 300s. I am not thinking of the majestic figures, like Arius or Athanasius, though let me introduce them briefly: Arius was a heretic. Athanasius was the saint who overcame Arius. But, of course, that is looking at things from this side of history. Back then, things were more unclear, and more innocent, somehow. Arius, the heretic, seems to have been a popular, serious, austere, and eloquent preacher.¹ He felt that people had gone too far in thinking of Jesus of Nazareth as God! His great line about Jesus went this way:

There was a time when he was not.

I am sure that Arius loved and honored Jesus. He just did not want to make Jesus equal to God the Father.

Athanasius, then, was the great theologian who overcame Arius and defended the full divinity of Jesus.

But, now, in this sermon, I am not thinking of the magnificent church leaders Arius and Athanasius, but rather I am thinking simply of the local parish pastors and bishops – people who did not have extraordinary skills of theology and persuasion, but were simply trying to be faithful pastors in their own situations. In

¹ Wilken, Robert Louis (2012-11-27). The First Thousand Years (p. 89). Yale University Press. Kindle Edition.

our day and age, the Nicene Creed is so settled and respected that it is hard for us to image an age when the fundamental doctrine of the Trinity was unsettled. But so it was in the mid 300s. In fact, there was a stretch of about sixty years when vast reaches of the church were Arian. That means that there were lots of local clergy and bishops who knew that they were spending their ministry serving in a heretical church, but who also knew that they themselves did not have the talent to do anything about it. All they could do was try to lie low and continue faithful in their own little churches.

David Goldman once told me a great line about Richard John Neuhaus, of blessed memory. This line was spoken by a friend of Neuhaus back when Neuhaus was still young and strong. The friend said that someday, when Neuhaus died, his tombstone should read "We will turn this thing around!"

Well, that is a fitting tribute to Richard John Neuhaus. He seemed to have boundless confidence that he could take on anything, take on the whole world, and turn this thing around.

But most of us do not have such self-confidence. Most clergy know ourselves to be weak and insignificant.

So, back in the days of Arius, there were clergy who spent their entire ministry serving in a heretical church. They knew that powerful and talented clergy and bishops were speaking poorly and unworthily of Jesus – that they denied the full divinity of Jesus. These humble clergy and bishops knew that something had gone wrong in the greater church, but they also knew that they did not have the strength to do much about it. They knew themselves to be overmatched. All they could do was to be as faithful as they could in their own little churches.

And thank God that they were faithful. Nobody remembers them. They might have served quietly till they died. And who knows: an Arian successor might have taken over then. If the bishop had his way, probably that was so. But we can thank God that the little, insignificant pastor served as faithfully as he did, else, who knows whether the greater church would ever have gotten back on track? I mean, eventually, the confusions about the doctrine of the Trinity were straightened out and received beautiful wording in the Nicene Creed. But if there had been no groundwork of faith abroad in the land, if there had been no faithful clergy and congregations, then who would have cared that the doctrine of the Trinity had been put into good words. The good words mattered because there were all these quiet pastors and clergy lying low, but remaining true to Jesus. They were weak, yet they were strong. Without such weak people, the renewal of the church would have been a very uphill battle.

Likewise in your own vocations. You might be weak and lowly when it comes to influence and powers of persuasion. And because you are weak and lowly, you might have to endure the compromise all around you of the high ideals you have had for your work. But work on faithfully! You might be ignored, overlooked, even abused, yet it is important that you labor on as faithfully as you can. The work of weak, but faithful laborers holds the promise of renewal someday.

SECOND, THE STRONG

Let's move on to a second possible meaning of St. Paul's saying, "when I am weak, then I am strong." In this second meaning, the strong need not apply. In this second, awful meaning, Christ has no need of the strong, but wants only the weak.

Surely, this meaning is wrong! To begin, think of St. Paul himself. He might consider himself to be weak, but in fact, he was one of the most profound and learned leaders of the early church. Here was a man who was equally at home in Jerusalem and in Athens. Here is a man who could stand before governors and councils and never blink an eye. Here was a man who could acquire the loyalty and friendship of countless co-workers in the church. Here was a man who indeed could "turn this thing around," even persuading the mighty St. Peter and St. James to reverse their ancient thinking on the dietary and circumcision laws for God's people. Paul was no wallflower. He was no man of meager talents. When he says that he is weak and therefore he is strong, he does not mean that Christ wants only the weak, else he himself would be excluded.

It has been so throughout history. Of course the worlds of art and science and literature have drawn some of the most brilliant minds of humanity. But so has the church! From St. Augustine to Karl Barth and Robert Jenson, the church has drawn from the deepest wells of talent and spirit.

I mean, think of my great predecessor here, Pastor Raymond Schulze. What a lawyer he would have made, with his mighty voice and eloquence! What an actor he could have been! What a scholar, especially with his gifts for Greek and German.

It has long been so that the church has benefited from the gifts of really talented people. And let this continue! May it ever be so. If you have gifts of learning and experience, of persuasion and especially of faith, then do lend your gifts to the church. Consider becoming a pastor. Consider serving as a congregational leader. The contributions of the strong are also very important for the church.

PRECISELY BECAUSE YOU ARE WEAK

My third interpretation of Paul's saying is a call to patient endurance. I want us to take to heart the idea that when we are weak, truly weak, it is then that we might be doing our best work for Christ.

This is something that clergy know from visiting the sick. This is one of the great privileges of being a pastor, to see how strong people can be for Christ precisely when they are weak. Here at Immanuel, we have had living examples before us of testimonies to the Lord from those who are weak. Who knows how any of us will bear up when we are sick? Maybe we will be able to give some great testimony for Christ, maybe not. Maybe our faith will remain true and strong, though we ourselves will be so preoccupied with pain and sadness that we might not much speak of our faith. Still, some people are given a measure of grace so that even when they are weak, and even when things seem out of control, and even when they have no assurance that they are going to survive, nonetheless, their

spirits remain strong and sweet, they go on praying for others, and they can go on visibly fighting the good fight of faith.

As my dear old Sunday School teacher used to say, “Any old dead fish can float downstream. It takes a live one to fight upstream.” Anyone can testify to Christ when the times are good and things are going well. And may such cheerful testimonies continue and be strong. But there is something even more impressive about words of faith when the going is bad. When I am weak, then I am strong. That paradox could be said of many people I have known over the years. They were weak, but Christ is strong and is well able to do marvelous things with the feeble words and deeds that remained open to them.

...UNABLE TO DO ANY GREAT WORKS

I close with a note from our Gospel Lesson. It is that strange saying about Jesus as he leaves behind his hometown, Nazareth.

⁵And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. ⁶And he marveled because of their unbelief. (Mark 6:5, RSV)

It sounds as if even for Jesus, it was hard for him to accomplish much if people were against him. If they just did not much believe in him, then it was hard for him to do any mighty deeds.

So it is with you and me too. If we would believe more in the people around us, maybe they would be able to do more. Even quiet and unpretentious people – people with only modest talents – might be able to do more in life if they heard from us that we are on their side. “When I am weak, then I strong” can also be true if you will be the strong one to help the weak along. Weak and insignificant people often can flourish under the sunshine of some words of encouragement.

So that’s my story. The church is made up of both strong and weak people, but each of us, both strong and weak, are important to the church and to Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.