

Pentecost Sunday

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A Demonstration of the Spirit's Power

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

May 27, 2007

A few weeks ago I found a used copy of a book called *The Power of the Powerless* by Christopher Da Vinck. It's a beautiful true story about two brothers: Christopher and his older brother Oliver. Oliver was born with severe birth defects – so severe that many people would call Oliver a vegetable. But here's how his brother Christopher tells the story: "I grew up in a house where my brother was on his back in his bed for thirty-two years, in the same corner of the room, under the same window, beside the same yellow walls. He was blind, mute. His legs were twisted. He didn't have strength to lift his head of intelligence to learn anything. Oliver was born with severe brain damage which left him and his body in a permanent state of helplessness."

And yet as Christopher explains in this book, Oliver has had a profound impact on those around him. As Christopher began to share the story of his brother's life, it was published, first, in the *Wall Street Journal* and then in then the *New York Post*. Christopher started to get letters from the around the world from people who had been touched and changed by Oliver's story. Even President Regan sent a personal letter saying how much it had changed his life. Christopher concluded: "As a teacher I spend many hours preparing lessons, hoping that I can influence my students ... Thousands of books are printed each year with the hope that the authors can move people to action ... Oliver could do absolutely nothing except breathe, sleep, eat and yet he was responsible for action, love, courage and insight."

This is THE principle that God has been teaching me over the last year. It's a principle that we could summarize in three words: power in weakness. God's power flows into and then gushes out of human weakness and vulnerability. That's the theme of the passage you heard read for this Pentecost Sunday.

Although Paul said that he did not come with eloquence and superior wisdom, this passage is marked by a brilliant and carefully organized structure. It's part of a larger context of three sections that focus on one big theme: power through weakness. So verses 18-25 focus on the God's power that comes through the weakness of what Jesus did on the cross. For the people of Paul's day – just like us – the idea of a Savior who gets strung up on a cross doesn't sound cool. It seems scandalous and foolish. We want an impressive, flashy, successful, powerful spiritual leader – not a crucified Savior. But according to the Bible there is a core principle at the center of reality: it's called power through weakness. And there is one place where that principle became very clear: the cross. In other words, when Jesus died on the cross it looked like weakness and failure and defeat, but at the same time incredible spiritual power was being unleashed, power for you and for me, to save us, forgive us, power to remake us into the image of God, power to raise us from the dead, power to free people held captive by bitterness and

addiction, power to heal our broken hearts and our broken bodies, power to free people from Satan's kingdom and transplant them into the kingdom of God's goodness and truth.

Then in section 2 (see verses 26-31) Paul turns a spotlight on the people in the church in the port city of Corinth. And he points to the same principle at work in them. "Look at yourselves," he tells them, "you weren't rich and flashy and famous. People looked down on you. You were the lowly and despised, but in His infinite and surprising mercy, God chose you and clothed you in the glory of Jesus' goodness." Here's the principle again: the power of the powerless, God's power shining through human weakness.

This isn't a negative message. God wants you to have power (see 1:18; 1:24; 2:5 and 2 Corinthians 4:7) and God wants power to flow through you to bless the world around you. It's just that there's something so much bigger, richer, stronger, and purer than us and our power: it's God's power – and that's what this passage is leading us to (see 2:5). When you go to a wedding, you seldom focus on the assistant to the bride. On that day, the bride is more glorious and important. When you watch a baseball game, you don't keep stats on the batboy. When you go to Broadway play, you don't focus on the stagehand. In all three examples, there is something greater, better, more interesting, more famous and powerful. In the same way, we have our place in the spiritual life - and it is important – but we're the assistant; we're the batboy; we're the stagehand. It isn't about us. The spotlight isn't focused on us. But, again, this does not denigrate us at all; it just points us to someone better, stronger, more glorious – God.

But God wants to pour out his power on human recipients, empowering us to live with love and courage, power to enter into the mess of a frightening world, power to forgive and be forgiven, power to face our own sin and darkness, power to live with joy and thanksgiving, power to endure suffering. God is looking to for a place to pour out his power because he never enjoys hoarding his power. God is looking for a people who will receive and then display his power. And he *will* find them. But only the humble, the open, the receptive, the empty-handed will receive it. If he finds our hands full or our lives too preoccupied with our own self-importance, he won't give us what we don't want.

Now Paul begins the third part to his argument. He gets very personal by saying this principle of God's power in human weakness defines his life too – not just Jesus, not just the church, but him. Read verse 1. Let's understand that Paul was writing in a specific context. He wasn't saying that it's always bad to be organized or eloquent or intellectually deep. Not at all. Paul was writing in a specific context of Greek culture that valued an academic discipline known as rhetoric. In public debates, in law courts, at funerals, in the marketplaces, crowds would gather just to watch people give polished speeches – sort of like we gather to watch fireworks. So as the speakers gave their talks, the crowds would ooh and ah. The key was to sound flashy, witty and intellectually deep. Their speeches were long on words but short on power and spiritual transformation.

So Paul is saying, “When I came to you (or it could be translated, “when I lived among you”), I wasn’t flashy and suave and “deep.” I’m a living, walking example of this principle at the center of reality: God’s power in and through human weakness.” Paul isn’t acting in false modesty here. We do know that his messages tended towards the dull side. Nobody was very impressed (2 Corinthians 10:10). We have a story about Paul recorded in Acts 20 when Paul was giving a sermon late at night. See Acts 20:9. I love that phrase “as Paul talked on and on.” We also get the impression that no one remembered the any of Paul’s sermon points as he talked on and on. But they did remember a young man named Eutychus who looked very dead but now was very much alive. They saw a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit and we read in verse 12 that they were “greatly comforted.” I bet Paul didn’t mind.

Paul basically had one message to the church in Corinth. In verse 2 he defines it this way: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” It doesn’t mean that Paul never talked about things like creation and sexuality and marriage and practical issues like how to do your job and ... It just means that the cross of Jesus was so central. If you want to get in touch with real power, if you want to live with power and confidence, if you want real strength, if you want to walk into your marriage or your job or suffering or into a scary world with confidence, then live from the center. Cling to the cross of Jesus.

But this real confidence and deep strength only comes to those who are willing to confess their utter inadequacy. Real strength comes when we die to the illusion of our arrogant self-sufficiency. See verse 3 – “I came to you in weakness and fear, and much trembling.” This isn’t just superficial fear. In the Old Testament these same two words – fear and trembling – were used to describe the armies of Pharaoh as the waters of the Red Sea came crashing down on them. This describes intense fear. But it wasn’t just fear; Paul also lived among them with “**much** trembling.”

This is not what we want to hear from our spiritual leaders. But when Paul wanted to list his impressive spiritual qualities, when Paul wanted to prove that he was leadership material, he pointed to his fear and his much trembling. If Paul was applying for a job as a pastor most churches wouldn’t want him. We might even tell him to get a grip on his fear. “That’s no way for a mature Christian to talk. Where is your victory in Jesus attitude?”

Here’s the amazing thing Paul: although he had a massive intellect and a driving personality and strong entrepreneurial skills, he was still not afraid to admit that he was afraid. The question at the center of Paul’s ministry was not “What good can I do for Christ?” but “What good can Christ do for the world through me?” It wasn’t “How much power can I muster for Jesus?” but “How much power can Jesus display through me and even my weakness?” Asking the right question makes all the difference in the world. If you ask the wrong question – i.e. “How much can I do for Christ?” rather than “How much can Christ do in and through me?” it leads to two radically different approaches to the spiritual life. The first is about me and my efforts; the second is about Jesus Christ and his life in and through me. The first leads to weariness and frustration and futility;

the second question leads to balance and wholeness and vitality. So which question fits you: “How much can I do for Christ and others?” or “How much can Christ do through me?”

And in verse 4 we see that this principle of power through and in weakness leads to a startling conclusion (at least it would have been very shocking to Paul’s original hearers): the person and the presentation are secondary; what really matters is the power of the Holy Spirit. Read verse 4. This doesn’t mean that the presentation lacked persuasion. It doesn’t mean that it was anti-intellectual or just a gush of emotions devoid of an ability to think carefully. Actually, in Acts 18:4-5 we read this: “Every Sabbath Paul reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.” But the persuasion and the presentation were not the main thing. The persuasion wasn’t based on the ooh and ah factor. It didn’t depend on the force or cleverness or mental agility of the speaker because the principle of power through weakness was at work here.

Remember: God wants you to have real power, power for living, power to prepare you for dying, power for living, power to overcome the grip of sin, power to live your faith and share your faith, power to forgive, power to take risks ... but that power isn’t in a message or the person giving the message. That’s why Paul could say, “I don’t care if I was smooth or slick or suave; I want you to see and hear and find ‘a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.’” And when the Holy Spirit shows up, we encounter the power of God

Here’s what we need in our lives: we need a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit. What does that look like? (See Romans 15:13 and 19). Sometimes it comes in dramatic ways. Someone who is sick gets healed. Someone who is far from Christ suddenly encounters God. Someone whose heart is empty and cold and dry suddenly has the love of God poured into his heart through the power of the Holy Spirit.

But it also often comes in quiet ways. It comes through lives that are quietly transformed by Christ. Example: a couple comes to me for premarital counseling. His side of the family is littered with brokenness and despair. Her side is littered with broken lives too. But for some reason God the Holy Spirit has touched her and touched his heart and they’ve become new creations in Christ. They are born again by the power of the Holy Spirit. And as they tell me their story I say, “Do you guys know that a miracle has happened? Do you guys know that you are a living, breathing example of a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit? I mean, this should not have happened. You guys should not be sitting in my office talking about your faith in Jesus – but here you are! Do you guys know what an incredible gift you are to the world? You’re like Adam and Eve starting over again. So go for it.”

And here’s the point of all of this. Verse 5 says, “So that (expresses purpose) your faith might not rest on man’s wisdom but on God’s power.” That’s the whole goal of the Gospel: to have us to rely on God’s power rather than just human wisdom. Human power and human wisdom aren’t bad; they just aren’t strong enough to build your life upon. God always offers something better, purer, richer, stronger: His power.

You've heard me talk about my mentor Doc or Dr. Philip Hinerman. For nearly thirty years Doc had a successful ministry at Park Avenue UMC in Minneapolis. He was a brilliant speaker who was nationally known for his creative outreach to the community and for his commitment to bring blacks and whites together during tense times. Doc was successful and powerful and famous. I sat under Doc for five years. He was my mentor for another fifteen years. And I learned some wonderful lessons from Doc's ministry success.

But then when he hit 70 Doc was forced to retire so he moved to Greensboro, NC and became the senior pastor of a large church. He continued with his bold preaching and his commitment to racial unity and reaching out to his own community. Except this time he ran into some powerful people who did not like his message. A small but vocal coalition formed against Doc. They accused him of dangerous ministry techniques and laziness – because he took a nap every afternoon (they didn't know – and Doc never told them – that he needed a nap because he was up between 4:00-5:00 am so he could pray for two hours). Eventually they fired Doc.

So at 72 years old, Doc was no longer the successful, popular, famous pastor anymore. His wife was sick with severe arthritis. But Doc was entering his greatest battle. I didn't know it at the time – actually I just figured it out this past week – but this was Doc's greatest legacy for me. How he handled suffering and injustice. How he handled weakness and vulnerability. Looking back on it now, I learned a lot from Doc during his successful days; but I learned even more from his days of struggle and weakness. The power of God shined more brightly through those days in Greensboro.

Remember God wants you to have real power, true strength, the deep joy and love and peace of the Holy Spirit. So let me ask you again, which question defines your life: "What good can I do for Christ?" or "What good can Christ do for the world through me?" Is it "How much power can I muster for Jesus?" or "How much power can Jesus display through me and even my weakness?"