

Pentecost 5B

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

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Power in Weakness

Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, "Look, we are your bone and flesh. ²For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel." ³So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel. ⁴David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. ⁵At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.

⁹David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inward. ¹⁰And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him. (2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10)

I know a person in Christ who...was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. ⁵On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but 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. ¹⁰Therefore 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 12:2-10)

When my niece Libby, who is now 19, was about three years old, she politely asked her mother for something. My sister told her "no." Libby politely asked again and again her mother said, "No." As I recall it, the request was not unreasonable and neither was the response. I don't remember exactly what it was, a cookie before dinner or something. Libby dissolved into tears and threw herself on the floor crying, "But I said 'Please!'" She just could not believe that the magic word "please" did not produce the desired effect. You could tell that she felt somehow betrayed after she had played by the rules.

It occurred to me that when our kids ask us for something, even if we plan to say yes, we usually remind them to say please. "Mom, can I have a cookie?" "What do you say?" "Please?" "Yes, you may have a cookie" In fact, it would be cruel, if knowing that we planned to say "no" we still reminded them to say please. "Mom, can I have a cookie?" "What do you say?" "Please!" "No, you may not have a cookie!" So, naturally Libby translated her parent's careful teaching into the understanding that if she said please she would get what she wanted. What a heavy lesson little Libby learned on that dark day in 1990, thrashing on my parents living room floor shortly before dinner.

It seems to me that there is a strand of theology that teaches much the same thing: if you say please, you will get whatever you desire. It is often called prosperity theology or the prosperity gospel. It goes something like this: if you are in God's will, if you are right with God, if you live rightly you will be happy, wealthy, healthy and at peace. The home page of one Prosperity gospel website says: "When you learn to expect God's favor, you will experience it more and more. There's real power in making the declaration: I am highly favored and beloved by the Lord!" While there are many things I agree with on this website, I struggle with a theology that suggests that the Lord's favor is measured in health, wealth and peace. I want to ask of these preachers: "It's not that God does not wish us to have these things but what do you say to cancer victims, to children who have lost their mom in a car accident, to the impoverished mother of four whose husband beats her as soon as she is no longer pregnant? Do you suggest that they did not expect enough of the Lord? If they expected more, they would get more? If they prayed harder? Had deeper faith? How much can one human being pray at the bedside of another? I have seen them pray without ceasing and still death comes and violence continues."

But if I/we take issue with the prosperity gospel, it begs the question: what can we expect from God? What claims can we make? On what can we hang our faith?

First, we can expect God to keep God's promises. God promised the people of Israel a king. Saul was a dismal king but David is, thus far, obedient and faithful and the spirit of the Lord is upon him. God promised a king that would preserve his people and protect them from their enemies. Under David, the people are united, enemies are defeated and the kingdom prospers.

Later on in the history of God's people, God promised a Savior, of the lineage of David, from the branch of Jesse. A Savior to, once and for all, free us from the power of our enemies, from death and from sin. And Jesus came. We can expect God to keep the promises that God has made. Second, we can expect God to be with us at all times and in all things. Pastor Wayne last week reminded us of the words of Jesus: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) And the words of Paul "For I am sure that nothing in all creation, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:39) Jesus Christ came not only to save us as promised, but to show us the extent to which God is with us...God, the creator of all things...is so much with us as to have become one of us.

The third thing we can expect from God is this: our weakness and suffering do not signal a lack of faith but instead, in our weakness and suffering the power of Christ can dwell in us. This is a hard one because it asks us to set aside some old definitions we have, especially as regards power.

The story about David fits a little better with our traditional understanding of power: political and military leadership, land and a visible throne. That looks like power, it feels like power as we see it played out all over our world. But even that power is dependent on God. Power is bestowed on David because David submits himself to the spirit of the Lord. There is a movement, a space for weakness in David when he acknowledges that in all things he is dependent on the Lord.

But it is in Jesus Christ that we are *really* challenged to rethink power. In fact, Jesus stands in stark contrast to the message of the prosperity gospel. Certainly no one was more in the will of God, more right with God, more trusting of God, than Jesus Christ. And what did that get Jesus? Happiness? Health? Wealth? Peace? No. Jesus appeared, at least in adulthood, to have lived a life of nomadic poverty. He lived like an outlaw much of the time: the mood of the following crowd swinging from adoration to trying to run him off a cliff. Jesus' earthly life does not look much like one who has found the Lord's favor.

What is the power of Christ? How is it different from our earthly understanding of power? Well, let's look first at that earthly power. Jesus used his power to tend to that which needed tending: to feed the hungry, heal the sick, raise the dead, and drive out demons. This is not power in the sense of might and land and thrones. But this is the power to restore relationships, create community, to bring life where there once was none. Jesus would not get highways named after him for these acts of power, but the unseen were seen and all people were given new hope.

Then Jesus used his power to empower others. He did not grant them a share of land but he gave fishermen and laborers the power to bring hope and heal diseases. Jesus did not hoard power... Jesus spread it out and shared it. Certainly all that the disciples did was done to his glory, but at the time, Jesus gained no political capital by spreading his power in the land. Jesus greatest concern was for the people of God. The more people working on his behalf, the more healing and hope was spread.

But ultimately the power of Christ was in submitting entirely to trust in God. I am drawn back time and again to the Garden of Gethsemane, just before his arrest, when Jesus is kneeling deep in prayer, in conversation with God, asking if things might be different. But in the end, he bows his head in deference to God's will. The picture painted there, viewed from an earthly perspective, is not one of power, but of submission, even weakness. But we know differently. Jesus did bow in deference to God's will but in the end, it was in weakness, in suffering, that the power of God was ultimately revealed as victory over sin and death.

Just as it is our suffering, when we have said "please" over and over again and still the answer seems to be "no!" When we are defeated, exhausted, out of options, when we have no other recourse than to lay wearily down at the foot of the cross, expecting nothing, it is then that we are most vulnerable to the power of Jesus Christ. When we have stopped struggling to control, stopped scrapping for land, stopped flexing our might, then Jesus steps in, in the fullness of his almighty power. Then Jesus gives us the strength to tend to the earthly things that need tending, then Jesus surrounds us with his workers that share the burden and give us hope, then Jesus kneels besides us and shows us that the cup from which we drink is a cup of life.

We can expect much from God. We may not always get a "yes" in response to our "please." But we are favored by God. Because that is God's will, for all. There are times when we will enjoy wealth, health and peace. But the favor of God rests in promises kept, God's assurance to be present in all things and in the power of Jesus Christ; which at the end of the day, is the only true and lasting power there is. Amen.