

Christ in Me

Preached on Sexagesima Sunday
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Feb. 7, 2021
Text: 2nd Cor. 11: 19-31

There is a hymn in our hymnal whose second verse reads:

*Thou didst reach forth thy hand and mine enfold;
I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea;
'twas not so much that I on thee took hold,
as thou, dear Lord, on me.*

These words are attributed to “Anonymous” which is quite fitting, given that they are not those of the self-assertive person seeking his or her own glory. Rather, they were written by a humble soul who knew that everything that makes us good Christians—and even what brings us to Christ in the first place—is not anything we can take credit for. The only reason we came to faith in Christ was because God drew us to himself and the only reason we continue in Christ and bear good fruit in our works is because his Holy Spirit has grafted us into Christ, who gives us our life and vitality, enabling us to live as new men and women. As Christians we’ve accomplished nothing we can truly call our own; the credit for it all goes to our gracious God.

Our collect reminds us too that we should thank God for our blessings when we so often want to pat ourselves on the back. We prayed earlier: “O Lord God, who seest that we put not our trust in any thing that we do; Mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity...” Every once in a while we need a reminder that anything good that we see in ourselves comes from God—we can’t be good on our own. In Galatians 2:20 St. Paul wrote:

*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, **but Christ who lives in me**; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

Think back to last week’s lessons. They reminded us to fight the good fight, to run the good race, and to labor on for God. The problem, though, is that when we see in our lives some victory over sin, we might start to feel a bit too confident in ourselves. We may start to believe that we are only getting what our hard work has entitled us to. We’re like those workers who labored all day and then resented the fact that those working for only an hour were paid the same as them. We forget that our good works are not our own. We forget that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,” and we start taking credit for the things we’ve done as if we’d done them on our own. We might even start thinking that God or our Christian brothers and sisters owe us something.

That’s when we need the reminder found in our lessons today: the reminder that the Church is not built on our strength, but is built on the strength of Christ working through weak and sinful people. If we understand that, then we truly understand the Grace of God. We need the reminder that we’re not supposed to trust in anything we do.

In fact, it reinforces our humility, so that we can say with Paul, “I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

In our Epistle lesson, St. Paul shows us his example of what it means to do everything for Christ while not trusting in ourselves. He shows us in practice exactly what we prayed in the collect. In his second letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul had to address them in regard to false apostles who were deceiving the church there and undermining the teachings that he’d given them. In order to one-up the true apostle, these men were going around the church boasting about their credentials. St. Paul warns the Corinthians against parading around their credentials—that’s not what the Gospel is about. But St. Paul needs to show them how the Gospel can beat the false apostles at their own game. He takes a somewhat sarcastic tone with these people. Look at verses 19-21a:

For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

When Paul had been at Corinth, he’d taught the people to value meekness and love; but now these false apostles are there and instead teaching the people to value pride and self-righteousness. Paul had come as a humble and Christ-like servant. These teachers have come to fleece the people and to make slaves of them so that they can advance themselves. It appears that they even bad-mouthed Paul—pointing to him as an example of weakness, because he wasn’t as successful or boastful as they were and because he valued humility instead of pride.

So Paul’s steps in and says, “Indulge me, folks. I know you don’t believe me that those who boast in themselves are fools, so let me prove my point.” So Paul reluctantly counters this with his own story—not because he wants to boast, but because he has to stand up for what’s right. Basically the false teachers are saying that Paul is a spiritual wimp. He has to respond even though he doesn’t want to. For he is aware of the ever-present temptation to assert spiritual superiority and so become just like those against whom he is contending. Real care must be taken when we decide to stand up to criticism. When our Christian gentleness is taken for weakness, when our self-control is taken for indifference, and when our humility is taken for inferiority, it just might be time for us to defend ourselves like St. Paul does. But notice this crucial requirement for such a defense: he’s not asserting himself—he’s asserting his God-given office. Look at his response:

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I

was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? (11:21-29)

Here's the Christian race and fight, the labor through the heat of the day that we focused on last week. If anyone had a right to brag about his work for the Kingdom it was St. Paul: five Jewish and three Roman beatings; a stoning; three shipwrecks; the dangers of travel in rough country, danger from robbers, crowded hostile towns, desolate wildernesses, and all sorts of dangerous sea voyages. He denied himself for the sake of the Gospel; he willingly endured weariness and pain; sleeplessness; starvation; voluntary fasting; cold and nakedness; his clothes were worn out and tattered. And on top of all that he is constantly burdened with the responsibilities of the churches he's planted and still oversees from a distance. He had a real burden for these people and it made his life difficult.

So Paul plays the game of the false teachers and he beats them hands-down. All the hardships that he's endured show that he's a real apostle who has suffered for his Lord, but now he's saying that there's something he can boast of that's even more important. In verse 30 he says: "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness." What an odd thing to say! Weakness is, by definition, not something one boasts about. What is Paul saying?

Well, he may be responding to those who might see his long litany of troubles as being "works of Paul." So he says that we should focus on God's work in his life. This he does by telling a story of how God taught him to be humble:

At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped his hands. (11:32-33)

This was a humiliating experience, and that is likely why Paul recounts it. God used the experience of having to be sneaked out of Damascus in a basket let down from a window to teach Paul a lesson about humility. Maybe he went into Damascus full of himself: "I'm Paul the Great Apostle!" We don't know if that's the case, but he left very humbly—and that's his point: Lest I think of myself too highly and lest I take too much credit for my good works, God always finds ways to remind me that Paul is Paul and God is God.

Yes, Paul and the other apostles received God's direct revelations in a special way that no one since has ever experienced. The apostles could speak with full authority, because they spoke for God. And yet they didn't let their office go to their heads. They remained humble servants of the people. That couldn't be said of these false teachers in Corinth, who claimed to speak for God, but who were full of pride and fleeced and

abused the people. And so Paul reminds them: I'm not an apostle because I deserve to be; God doesn't speak to me because I'm super-human. I'm just a sinful man whom God has graciously chosen to be his servant. He even goes on, saying in chapter 12, verse 7:

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (12:7-9)

There's no way for us to be certain what that thorn in the flesh might have been. Some interpreters have said that this was a particular sin with which he struggled. Others think that this was most likely some kind of physical problem—some say epilepsy, extremely bad eyesight, a speech impediment, or some kind of crippling handicap. Whatever it was we have no way of knowing for certain. What's important is that it was something that kept Paul from being prideful. It was something that kept him from claiming that all the success he'd seen in preaching the Gospel was his and not God's doing.

We also may have something we wish God would remove from us, some habit or desire or malady. We might pray for healing in this area just as Paul did, praying something like: "God, this problem is something bigger than I can handle. I don't want the pain or humiliation anymore. It's impeding my work for you. If you would only take it away I could do better work for you." And God may reply to us as He did to Paul: "Live in my grace. That's all you need. People will see me working through you, doing the things you could never do on your own. You'll be a witness for me to the people you meet."

Paul has taught us to join together that running of the race and fighting the fight with the deepest of humility. If anyone had a right to boast and be prideful it was he. But he wasn't prideful and he didn't pretend to be self-reliant. St. Paul did his best, but ultimately it was not he doing it; it was Christ working through him.

There are many Christians who live their lives with a lack of confidence, doubting their ability to accomplish the tasks set before them or fearing that they aren't able to do what they know they need to do. They lose motivation, bow out of the fight, and sit on the spiritual sidelines. But if we would only remember, as the hymn states, that it is not we who reached out to take Christ's hand, but he who reached out and took ours, we would be able to go about the work of the Kingdom with confidence! This runs contrary to worldly wisdom, which teaches us that success comes as you recognize your own worth and come to "believe in yourself." But the Gospel reminds us that it's through humility that we enter the Kingdom. It's also through humility that we build the Kingdom, as God works powerfully through weak and sinful men and women like us. Jesus took our hand in the first place. If you or I had taken His, we could always let go.

But that's not how it works. Jesus took your hand and he took my hand and His grip on us will never fail. The weaker we are, the stronger He will be. May that knowledge give us confidence to run the race and fight the fight, trusting not in our power and ability, but wholly in His.

In the Name...