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Pentecost 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Strength For the Weak”

Text: Mark 6:1-13; 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 (Ezekiel 2:1-5)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus had just raised a little girl from death to life. He had just healed a woman who had a bleeding problem for twelve long years. We heard of those things last week. And next, Mark tells us, Jesus went home. Perhaps because He wanted to do for them what He was doing for so many. Jesus wanted to help and be merciful to all people, and so certainly also for His family, His brothers and sisters, and for His friends, those He grew up with.

But no. They did not want Him or His gifts. They were offended at Him and His preaching. And so we hear those sad words: ***He could do no mighty work there.*** Not because He didn't have the power - He did. He most certainly did. But because they didn't have faith. They *wouldn't* have faith. They did not have the faith to receive the gifts Jesus had come to bring.

It is commonly assumed this was because they knew Jesus. They knew Him when He was “yea-high.” They grew up with Him and went to the same school with Him. They knew His brothers and sisters who were probably sitting right there in the synagogue that very day. And they knew Him when He helped His father in the carpentry shop. So who is He to now think He can teach us about God? Who does He think He is? ***And they took offense at Him.*** The Greek says they were *scandalized*.

But *knowing* Jesus is only part of the reason they rejected Him. Even more, I think, they were scandalized *because of what He said*. For if Jesus had just been like some of the guys (and gals) we see on TV these days, they probably wouldn't have had any problem with Jesus. If He had just preached about those bad, nasty Romans, or how to have prosperity and health and wealth, or that you're all doing okay, keep up the good work! *all would have been well*. They probably would have liked that Jesus very much. Local boy makes good and all that. Maybe they would have even named the street in front of the synagogue for Him.

But that's not what Jesus said. Mark tells us earlier what Jesus' message was as He went about preaching. He said: ***The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at***

hand; repent and believe in the Gospel. Repent. That was the problem. Nobody like to be told that. Preach against others and *you go, Jesus!* Preach against us and . . . um . . . *you can go, Jesus!*

That's the danger still for you and me, Jesus' brothers and sisters through baptism today. If I stand here and preach against the sins of *others*, all those horrible people *out there* and their horrible and unspeakable sins and how *they* need to repent and change, *you go, Pastor!* But if I preach about *your* sins, *your* unbelief, *your* unholy living, do you respond the same way?

I had a person in my church in New York who would say, when I preached about certain sins: *Don't go there, Pastor!* Why? Is that sacred ground? Is that something you love more than God? Something that you know is wrong, but you really don't want to give up? Your pet sin, your secret pleasure, that everyone's doing, that really isn't so bad, that's not hurting anyone . . . We don't like to be told to repent either. **But we must.** For whether you know it or feel it or acknowledge it or not, your sin is killing you. And your Father in heaven cares about you too much not to tell you that. *Thus says the Lord* must be proclaimed, as God told Ezekiel, ***whether they hear or refuse to hear.***

It's not easy to repent. It's kind of like dying - killing our pride, our self-esteem, our high opinion of ourselves - and none of us wants to die. But Jesus promises resurrection, forgiveness, and new life. Jesus doesn't preach repentance and then leave you in your sin, struggling for a way out of your guilt and shame, your hurt and despair. He came to be that way out for you. To die and rise for you. To give hope and healing, forgiveness and new life to you. To give you what you need the most. That's why He went to His hometown that day, and why He comes here to you today.

And it's why He then sent His twelve out to preach the very same message. ***They went out and proclaimed that people should repent.*** They went out with nothing - ***no bread, no bag, no money, and only one piece of clothing.*** They went out with only the promise of Jesus, for them and for others. It could not have been easy to do that, especially since Jesus warns them that there will be those who will reject them, who will take offense at them, who will be scandalized because of them. That what happened to Jesus would happen to them.

You know how that is too. You have family members, friends, and neighbors, some of whom believe differently than you do, or don't believe at all. And you try to speak the truth in love to them, but all you get is grief. They laugh and scoff at you. They think you're a few cards short of a full deck. They accuse you of being a hypocrite. All you want to do is share the wonderful news of your Saviour with those who mean the most to you. All you want is for them to have the joy you have.

All you want is for them to know the love of God for them in Jesus Christ, that they too might believe and receive His gifts. That's all you want. And it hurts to be rejected, doesn't it? Ezekiel knew it, Jesus knew it, and the twelve knew it.

And at just such times, you seem like a failure. You seem weak and vulnerable . . .

Well don't be afraid to be weak. And don't underestimate the power of weakness. (Now that's an oxymoron, isn't it? The *power of weakness!*) But it's true. It's the theology of the cross.

It's what St. Paul was speaking of today in the Epistle when he said, ***when I am weak, then I am strong***. We usually don't think of Paul as weak - he's the world's greatest missionary after all! He went all over the place fearlessly proclaiming the Gospel and starting about a bazillion churches! But that's not quite the reality. Truth is, Paul was quite weak. He tells the Corinthians that "*I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling*" (1 Cor 2:3), and we heard today about his "***thorn in the flesh***". We're never told what that is, but whatever it was, it was given ***to keep him from becoming conceited***. To keep him humble and weak, relying not on himself or his own power, but on Christ and His power. Which is true power. ***Power which is made perfect in weakness***.

Now, Paul didn't like that. He didn't want that thorn, he didn't want to be weak. And so he prayed over and over that God take it away. *Really, God, I can do more without it! I'll do better, I'll preach better without it. You just don't understand. I'll be a better missionary if you just take it away. Have you ever thought that or felt that or prayed that? Lord if you'll just do this or do that or give this or take away that, I'll be much better! You'll see. I have. But God said, **Nope!** I do understand. More than you know. You need this Paul. You're afraid to be weak but you need to be weak. For strength can be an idol, too. As well as an illusion.*

But ***the power of God is made perfect in weakness***. And exhibit 1A is Jesus, who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, leaving His throne for a manger. God become man. The rich become poor. The almighty become weak. To ascend the cross for you. To die for you. Jesus' rejection in His hometown is a foreshadowing of His rejection that led to the cross. His rejection there, His sacrifice there, so that . . . what? That His weakness be strength for you. His death be life for you. His humility be exaltation for you. His condemnation be forgiveness for you. And in His resurrection, all this is yours. That ***when you are weak, you may be strong***.

Now notice what those words say: ***when you are weak, then you are strong***. It doesn't say that you'll ever stop being weak - but that *when you are weak, you will be strong, with the strength of Christ. The strength to love, the strength to forgive,*

the strength to serve, the strength to lay down your life for others. *To be like Christ.* For as we prayed in the Collect of the Day earlier: *O God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy.* Yes, that is true strength.

It's not easy. Paul didn't want it; neither do we. It might lead to times of rejection, like when Jesus went home. But just as we should not underestimate the power of weakness, so also do not underestimate the power of God's Word and what God is doing through that Word. Maybe it just needs to percolate for a while.

But the Word does its work. Just as it does here, for you. The Word that in the beginning created everything that is, and now creates children of God in Holy Baptism. The Word that brings us low and calls us to repentance, and then raises us up in the forgiveness of sins. The Word that transforms ordinary bread and wine in the Body and Blood of Christ to be our food.

Yes, this all looks very weak. And some, just like with Ezekiel or in Jesus' hometown or with the twelve who went out, take offense at it and reject it. But here is the powerful weakness of God for you and for all. If God had come in His awesome power, we sinners would not be able to come and receive Him. We'd be like Adam and Eve and trying to hide. But hidden in weakness He comes, that we may come. Hidden in weakness He comes for you. And ***His grace is sufficient for you.*** For your weakness, your hurts, your struggles, your brokenness, your disappointments, your rejection, your shame, your sin and death. He took it all to the cross that you may live in the strength and freedom of His forgiveness and love. His forgiveness and love that is unfailing. His forgiveness and love that never ends.

So when you are weak, when you think you can't go on, when you seem like a failure, when you are burdened by sin and guilt, when the strength of sin and death and the world seems too much for you - come and receive the powerful grace and gifts of your Lord Jesus that He comes and brings for you - His forgiveness and life, His Spirit and His salvation - that are exactly what you need. And then go in His strength, not in your own. Go in His strength, in His powerful weakness, as His gift to others. The gift He gives you to be, to those in all walks of life, in all places, even the most unlikely of places. Go, still with thorns in your flesh, probably. Still weak, yes. Still afraid, perhaps. But knowing this: that you go not alone, but that Christ lives in you (Gal 2). And when Christ lives in you, ***when you are weak, then He is strong.***

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.