

Title: Strength for the Weak

Subtitle: Promises of comfort for those hurt by life's sorrows.

One of the surprising things about the Gospel is that it is always relevant. Our readings speak powerfully today as we live in an increasingly polarized and divided culture. As such, the call to follow Jesus into the trenches of the hostile world becomes increasingly difficult. Therefore, the words of our opening Collect are especially needed as they articulately express the need for God *“to have compassion on our weaknesses, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness, we cannot ask.”*¹

To make our unworthiness more relatable than high-sounding platitudes, I want to share a tale of two Christians to give these words a human face.

The first is Corrie Ten Boom. She is a woman I met as a freshman at Montreat College. Most of you may be familiar with her story. She is the sole survivor of a family that was killed in a Nazi concentration camp during WWII. After the war, she often traveled and shared stories about God's grace. One day after one of her lectures, she encountered a former guard who was responsible for the deaths of her father and sister. He came up to her and asked for forgiveness. At that moment, what he had done filled her imagination. She admits she didn't have the willpower to forgive, but the moment she extended her hand, God's love filled her heart, and forgiveness followed.

The second tale is about a Christian who has served the Lord for over 50 years yet confesses that he has struggled with nightmares in which he finds himself encountering a bully who

¹ BCP, p. 231 Collect for Proper 11

challenges him to a street fight, where nothing would be gained but the defending of their foolish pride. That incident was embarrassing because he had been trained as a boxer and was on the school boxing team. Then, a year or two later, the news came that the same guy had sexually assaulted a neighborhood sweetheart who he secretly held in high regard with fond affection. As the scenario replays in his imagination, he regrets not taking that bully up on his offer because he would have liked the opportunity of putting him in his place and defending the young woman he deeply cared about. He awakens out of these nightmares with the guilt of knowing Christ calls him to forgive but struggles with his desire for unresolved justice.

In both cases, the hostilities faced caused deep wounds. In Corrie's case, she experienced supernatural help. The second case, as you may have guessed, is me. I am still seeking the grace to forgive completely. Therefore, today's lessons, along with the message I deliver, are ones that I desperately need.

Any of us can fall into replaying old messages about the harsh and cruel things others have said or done. If you take those messages to heart, you might find yourself in a situation similar to mine, where the memory still haunts you, and bitterness threatens to take hold of you.

Hostilities abound in our culture. They are played out each week in hurtful and degrading rhetoric that abounds in social media. If such things are not dismantled, they will eventually erupt in actual physical harm, as we have seen played out in the past two weeks in our political arena. None of us is immune to such damage. Life has its difficulties, rough spots, and tragedies.

The 15th-century Christian mystic Julian of Norwich wrote, "If there be anywhere on earth [where] a lover of God is always kept safe from falling, I know nothing of it. But God has shown

me that in falling and rising again, we are always kept in that same precious love.”²

In our Old Testament lesson, Jeremiah affirms that despite unfaithful shepherds, God will draw his people to himself, care for them, lead, guide, and shepherd them even as they face life’s harshest realities. Similarly, our Gospel today affirms that when *“Jesus sees the crowd, he had compassion for them,”³ for he had seen the signs in the crowd that He had often seen in a flock of sheep that has lost its shepherd. The masses were hungry for direction, so “Jesus began to teach them many things.”*

In our New Testament lesson, Paul writes to the saints in Ephesus. He describes the hostility and alienation that Christians experienced from those who grew up in the Jew/Gentile culture divide. Unfortunately, both had a hard time forgiving and loving each other. For traditional Jews, it must have been unbelievably hard to lay their highly regarded religious customs at the foot of the cross in the belief they were no longer necessary. Then, on the other hand, Gentiles also had their idolatrous ways that needed to be put aside. Both groups wrestled with personal pride and self-righteousness. Both needed a savior to help dismantle the “dividing walls of hostility”⁴ that separated them. Thankfully, by shedding the Savior’s blood, both groups were reconciled to God and each other.

God is building his new society quietly but relentlessly. This new society of black and white, rich and poor, sinner and saint, male and female, bond and free is what God calls his Church, his body. She is a new creation and is able to do what civil laws can never accomplish and be what no political society

² Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love (1373)

³ Mark 6:34

⁴ Ephesians 2:14 paraphrased “the dividing wall of hostility.”

can enforce. Now, through the work of the Holy Spirit, there are no “*strangers and foreigners*” but “*fellow citizens with God’s people and members of his household.*”⁵ This dynamic has taken place because they have been reconciled to God and one another by the forgiveness of their sins that were nailed to the cross.

A contemporary Christian song entitled “Orphans of God” expresses the sentiments Paul addressed. The words are:

*Who here among us has not been broken
Who here among us is without guilt or pain
So oft’ abandoned by our transgressions
If such a thing as grace exists
Then grace was made for lives like this*

The song continues with an invitation:

*Come ye unwanted and find affection
Come all ye weary, come and lay down your head*

The Church of Jesus Christ needs to be a place where no one feels like an orphan. We may struggle, but God has promised to build his Church with “compassion on our weaknesses.” Now, because of all he has done, we are being built together as “*a holy temple in the Lord*” in which “*God dwells by His Spirit.*”⁶ This power will help heal the world and break down every wall that separates us. It is the power of God’s love poured out on believers as they submit their lives to him. Amen.

⁵ Ephesians 2:19

⁶ Ephesians 2:21-22