

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time - 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

There was a feud between the Pastor and the Choir Director of a Southern Baptist parish. The first hint of trouble came when the Pastor preached on "Dedicating oneself to service" and the Choir Director chose to sing: "*I Shall Not Be Moved*". Trying to believe it was a coincidence, the Pastor put the incident behind him. The next Sunday he preached on "Giving." Afterwards, the choir squirmed as the director led them in the hymn: "*Jesus Paid It All.*" By this time, the Pastor was losing his temper. Sunday morning attendance swelled as the tension between the two became public. A large crowd showed up the next week to hear his sermon on the "Sin of Gossiping". Would you believe the Choir Director selected: "*I Love To Tell the Story.*" There was no turning back. The following Sunday the Pastor told the congregation that unless something changed he was considering resignation. The entire church gasped when the Choir Director led them in singing: "*Why Not Tonight.*" Truthfully, no one was surprised when the Pastor resigned a week later, explaining that Jesus had led him there and Jesus was leading him away. The Choir Director could not resist singing: "*What a Friend We Have In Jesus.*"

St. Paul ends today's second reading with a paradox, a seeming contradiction. He says, "**Whenever I am weak, then I am strong.**" Now, what does that mean? It seems to make about as much sense as saying, "Whenever I am sad, then I am happy", or "Whenever I am short, then I am tall."

Yet our inability to understand Paul is part of his purpose. Because Paul, much like Jesus before him, would often use a contradiction to seize our attention, and to force us to think more deeply about something that is important.

What Paul wants us to think about is something that all of us have in our lives: a combination of both strengths and weaknesses.

Paul is convinced that in knowing Christ, we will approach both our gifts **and** our shortcomings in a dramatic new way.

Let's start with the obvious: no one of us is good at everything. Each one of us has certain gifts, certain relationships in which we excel and other ones in which we struggle. We are proud of what is strong in our lives, and rightly so, for there are few things in life as satisfying as knowing that we have a strength that we can use effectively.

We rightly take pride in saying, "I'm a good listener," or "I know how to communicate with people," or "I have the ability of motivating people or making them laugh."

We take pride when we can claim that we have relationships that lift us up, or when we know that we can bake well or make something beautiful with our hands. Each one of these things is a strength in our life and it is something that we willingly place before others.

Our weaknesses are different. Our weaknesses tend to embarrass us. It's difficult for us to say, "I am often impatient," or "I frequently overeat," or "I am poor at protecting myself against the demands of others," or "It's difficult for me to admit I'm wrong."

These are our weaknesses, and each one of us knows what our weaknesses are. We know the things that trip us up, and it is difficult to look at them. We want to hide them.

But that is what is so shocking about St. Paul's words in today's Scripture. Paul says that he wants to **boast** in his weaknesses.

Now why does Paul want to **boast** in his weakness? Because Paul knows that his weakness can lead him to Christ.

Our strengths tend to lead us to ourselves. Our weaknesses lead us to Christ. For when we have to face something that we are poor at, something that we know it is difficult or impossible for us to do, it is in that moment that we know that we must turn and ask the help of another.

When despite our best efforts we don't improve in certain areas, and certain things keep tripping us up, those very weaknesses become the opportunity where we can turn to the Lord and say: "Lord, you need to help me here, because I'm very poor at this, and it never goes well." Once we make that request, we must trust and believe that Christ will answer.

Now none of this is magic. When we ask for help it does not mean that suddenly all of our weaknesses will evaporate, or the people we find difficult will suddenly become our best friends.

People who are difficult in our life tend to remain difficult, and the weaknesses in our life tend to live on. But when we approach our weaknesses in faith, instead of depressing us and paralyzing us, they can provide an opportunity where we let go of the things we cannot handle and hand them over to Christ.

Paul was like us. He looked at his weakness, the "thorn in his flesh," and he prayed, "Jesus, take this away." Christ's response was, "No. I'm not going to take it away. But my grace is sufficient for you.

Even though your weaknesses will remain, they will not destroy you because they will provide an opportunity for my power to become manifest."

That is why St. Paul could **boast** in his weakness. His weakness provided the opportunity for him to trust in a higher power.

If we allow **our** weaknesses to do the same, then we will be able to say and understand what St. Paul said and understood: “Whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” AMEN.