

Pentecost 9B
Peace, Seattle
July 5, 2015
Mark 6:1-13

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

Over the 4th of July some years back, Chris and I were in Oregon spending time with her family near Cannon Beach. Her brother Doug and his wife, Christine, have two children—both young adults now—but back then they were 5 and 3.

And Aiden at age 3 was constantly in motion. From the moment he got up in the morning to the moment his head hit the pillow at night, he was on the move.

Well, during a day of hard play at the beach, Aiden had somehow acquired a sliver in the side of his big toe. I don't know how he got it, or how long he'd had it, but by dinnertime it was causing him considerable pain.

As we all sat at the table together in the tiny kitchen of the beach house we were using, it was impossible for poor Aiden to think about food—his toe hurt too much!

The six adults around the table offered their sympathy; we hated to see him suffer.

We all knew the end point of this episode had to be the removal of the sliver—and I think Aiden knew this too—but in his mind, the idea of anyone getting near that sore toe or doing anything that might cause him more pain was overwhelming to his young mind.

So, when his parents suggested that they have a look at the sliver, Aiden would have none of that. Doug tried to reassure him, but this only seemed to heighten his anxiety, and so he backed off.

AIDEN, WHEN YOU'RE READY, I CAN TAKE THE SLIVER OUT. Doug said.
YOU LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU WANT IT OUT.

When Aiden started crying again. I offered the contents of my FIRST AID KIT, and Doug got out some tape and tweezers. But Aiden wasn't ready for it.

We went through this cycle two or three times until Aiden's parents took him out of the kitchen and into a quiet corner of the living room where the negotiations continued.

Lo and behold, a few minutes later, Aiden came running back to the table.

The patience of his parents proved itself. Aiden finally saw that his pain could be over as soon as he was willing to take the risk of allowing his Dad to pull out the sliver.

When he climbed into his chair and grabbed his hot dog, the sliver—and his tears—were gone.

Do you know what it's like to feel vulnerable? If so, you may have noticed in today's gospel and in Paul's letter, themes of vulnerability sounding in the stories.

There's something here about limits, about weakness, about bringing our fragile selves into the service of God's kingdom as disciples of Jesus.

Paul, in Corinthians, speaks of his own THORN IN THE FLESH, a thorn he wanted God to remove, but which God told him he'd have to learn to live with.

“My grace is sufficient for you,” God tells Paul. “For my power is made perfect in weakness.” What an odd sort of good news.

And Mark, in his gospel, tells how Jesus was rejected by the folks from his own hometown; how they took offense at him, and how he marveled at their unbelief.

On the heels of this rejection, Jesus sends his disciples out on a mission. Interesting timing.

Now, by this point in Mark’s gospel the disciples have not shown themselves to be a crew which inspires much confidence. Their faith in Jesus and in God is continually lacking, and they seem to be CLUE-LESS about the signs and wonders they witness.

Yet, these seemingly ill-prepared apprentices are the very ones to whom Jesus entrusts the mission of preaching and healing and facing off with evil powers.

As we’ve marked our nation’s independence this weekend, concerns about fires have tempered our celebrations.

- Lives lost to senseless violence linger on our consciences.
- Reports of failing economies and expanding war zones overseas and soaring housing costs here at home pick away at our collective psyche.

Even we who know where our next meal is coming from are feeling a bit vulnerable.

The world’s solution to vulnerability, whatever form that vulnerability takes, is to steel itself; to build bigger stockpiles and construct higher walls; to do everything in its power to lessen the risk; to try technical solutions for problems that are embedded in human nature.

The world’s solution is to put its confidence in more sophisticated firewalls as a means of protecting and saving itself.

It will be telling, as we watch the field of presidential candidates swell (almost by the day) which talking points, which rhetoric, from which candidate will finally win the day.

The apprentices Jesus sends out are commanded to follow a different path. Vulnerability, instead of being avoided at all costs, seems to be encouraged!

Notice his instructions to the Twelve in verse 8:

- He orders them to take nothing for their journey except a staff:
- No food, no luggage, no extra clothes.
- No VISA or Triple AAA card to pull them out of the ditch.
- No weapon.

The point, first, is this: as disciples of Jesus, we learn to carry our vulnerability instead of a whole lot of things to protect ourselves. We remember that we can be as much a part of the problem in this world as we are a part of the solution, and that, therefore, we must trust and rely on the mercy and strength of God working through our vulnerabilities to accomplish what needs doing around us.

And second, by leaving our armor and defenses behind we become more aware of the vulnerability of those who are suffering around us. And with that awareness the Spirit uses us to bring healing and compassion and strength, and the kind of peace which a well-defended world cannot give.

Earlier in this same letter Paul speaks eloquently about how we who carry the good news treasure of God's love for all humankind, carry it in the fragile, clay jars of our lives,

“So that it is clear that this extraordinary power comes from God and not from us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;

Persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed;

Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.¹

What is your hope for Peace congregation? My hope and prayer is that we become not only a community where care is given and received, where splinters are removed, where sorrow is shared and joy multiplied; but that we also become a community where our perceived needs are rearranged.

A place where we are given needs we would never have had, were we not part of this church.

A community in which God's power is made perfect in our weakness.

Christ gathers us around the Table this morning to give us bread for the journey, and then, he sends us out. And he asks us to trust that this food, his presence, will be enough.

And though, at times on this journey, we may find ourselves without supplies or defenses right when we think we need them most, he calls us to find strength in each other. And to never cease trusting—that we are—beloved daughters and sons of God. And that is enough.

Amen.

¹ 2 Corinthians 4:7f