

Power Made Perfect in Weakness
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
July 8, 2012
Rev. John M. Cleghorn
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12: 6-10

Hugh McColl has a certain way of pronouncing the word “power.” The retired banker speaks with a southern accent that he mindfully kept as his influence spread, first across the South, then the nation, then the world.

You can tell a true southerner – of any race or region – by how he or she employs a few select letters from the alphabet, including the letter “r.”

For McColl, the word is never “powerrrr.” It’s “pow-ah” and it’s one of his favorites. When the four-state bank called NCNB doubled in size, he changed its name to NationsBank and he described his plans for the bank with the tag line “the Power to Make a Difference.”

Hugh meant those words. He used the bank’s “powah” and influence to push the banking industry toward more progressive practices in areas such as work-life balance, community development, diversity hiring and promotion and minority contracting and lending.

But there was an ironic twist to McColl’s success. At the pinnacle of his achievement, he had lost control over his life. His time was not his own. Especially in Charlotte, but in many other cities and in Washington, power brokers wanted his input or blessing before moving forward. As a result, every minute of every day was scheduled.

Late one night when I worked for him, we were returning to Charlotte from an evening obligation in another city. He sighed wearily and quietly confessed his mixed feelings about how things had turned out.

“All I ever wanted was the power to have control over my life,” he said. “I have the power but I’ve lost the control.”

I share that story with you not to try to garner sympathy for Mr. McColl. He’s publicly conceded that he lost \$100 million when Bank of America’s stock crashed but it’s not as if he is living in poverty. Far from it.

I share that story as a reminder that power – worldly power, that is - is a funny thing. It’s also a dangerous thing. Power brings with it all sorts of unexpected complications, some of which even material comfort cannot begin to solve.

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The Apostle Paul had his own blessings and challenges – and they came with his effort to live in the tension between worldly power and the power we get from our Lord.

Rarely if ever again has God called a servant of such enormous energy, deep conviction, driving faith, unwavering courage and compulsion to spread the gospel as Paul. But, as with many extraordinary leaders, Paul was a complex man. He had no lack of confidence, but God saw to it that Paul's ego didn't get too far ahead of him.

In his second letter to an assembly of believers he had organized in the ancient city of Corinth, Paul does his best to relate. He is concerned with a group he calls "super-apostles" who claim to have an inside track on God's will and desire for the early church. He faced a tricky task – convincing the assembly in Corinth that the so-called "super-apostles" did *not* have special divine wisdom – and, in fact, that he did as a true, called apostle.

But Paul didn't try to win the day by asserting his power or superiority. Instead, he admitted his weakness. He told the Corinthians of a "thorn" in his flesh, an affliction he doesn't describe in detail. Historians and theologians have long debated what that thorn was and most agree it was some type of physical affliction.

Whatever it was, Paul asked God three times to remove it. Three times God declined. Paul reports that God says these words to him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." That leads Paul to an even deeper understanding of God's ways and God's power in love and in grace.

In response, Paul shares a new outlook on his situation.

"So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

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The Bible is full of mind benders - propositions, conclusions and truths that the world apart from God cannot and does not understand. Power made perfect in weakness is close to the top of the list. But it is, in effect, the central truth of the Gospel – that God came in weakness to overcome the strongest powers of all, those of sin and death.

How can we relate such mind-bending truth to our every-day lives? Some unpacking is involved. Let's start with thorns.

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What does it mean to have a thorn in our flesh?

These thorns may be conditions we live with and endure. Our thorn may be a physical illness like Paul's, perhaps a chronic condition, something we face every morning when we wake up.

Or our thorn may be a mental or psychological condition, such as depression or anxiety, part of our being that is in our DNA or a result of something that has happened to us, the kind of condition that society doesn't like to talk about, apart from the pharmaceutical ads.

Our society has plenty of other kinds of thorns, aspects of life together that have become deeply imbedded points of brokenness and dysfunction. As a congregation this summer, we're taking a look at two examples of that in our Sabbath studies series. Last month we studied our immigration system, which works for the rich, educated and influential but, too often, leaves vulnerable the more common immigrant. The second societal thorn – which we start to study next Sunday - is the Grand Canyon that has developed in America between the have and the have-nots, an imbalance that has reached proportions that are potentially irreversible and cancerous to a nation that seeks fairness and justice for all.

Then there are our thorns as Presbyterians.

As with almost all major protestant denominations, the Presbyterian Church USA continues to experience a sustained and sometimes tortuous transformation. No doubt, our denomination will emerge as something new for our generations and those that follow. But none of us sees that "new thing" quite yet.

This week in Pittsburgh, commissioners from churches and Presbyteries nationwide gathered to set national policy. The assembly included action on literally hundreds of proposals. But high-profile issues such as who owns church property, the ordination of qualified gays and lesbians, the definition of marriage, divestment in the Middle East and others set the stage.

So, the air was highly charged before the delegates and commissioners even got to the meeting. Would we, as Presbyterians, engage in conflict or compromise? Would the assembly make honest efforts at reconciliation or slip into even deeper division? Could generations old and new find common ground and shared trust?

Would hundreds of congregations threatening to leave the denomination find reason to go ahead and do so? In short, how would the voting power of all of these and other perspectives play out?

The complexity of a “both/and” outcome became clear when Neal Presa, our newly elected moderator, the person who leads the national meeting, first spoke. He said that he hoped the convention could live in the “healthy tension” that comes with deep theological differences. His words signaled there would be no ducking of the tough issues, no magic wand freezing time and relieving us all of the task of finding a way forward despite the inherent risks and dangers. Real change – in any direction – just doesn’t work like that.

Paul seemed to know that all those years ago in ancient Corinth. He’d received word that some there had begun withholding their financial support from the larger church, just as many of our sister congregations have begun withholding their support from the denomination.

But Paul didn’t try to muscle those who had their doubts to get them back in the fold. He didn’t manipulate them. He didn’t threaten them. He made no promises about how God or other early Christians would treat them if they did one thing or the other. He might have tried to use his power that way. But he didn’t.

Instead, he talked about his weakness. He talked about that thorn in his side. But he did not say that as Christians we are simply to grin and bear our problems in passive endurance. No, Paul said, his thorn had served a very helpful and active role. It had kept him grounded and in touch with his humanity, his brokenness, his imperfection, his vulnerability, his dependence on God. That thorn reminded him of how God came into the world with all of its power and submitted to humility in Christ.

“For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ,” Paul wrote, “that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (2 Cor. 8:9)

And in today’s reading, Paul summarizes with what God said to him:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9)

That is what it means to be a person of Christ, Paul said. In the grace of Jesus Christ, there is untold power. On the cross and in the resurrection, we see that God’s weakness is stronger than any human strength.

Such is God’s power, and, Paul says, we are called to exercise power in the same way. For Paul, his thorn in the side painfully reminded him to seek humility, not power, just as God became humble and walked the earth in Christ. Paul’s thorn gave him capacity for

empathy, to abide with others even in disagreement, to find the generosity of heart and spirit to make room for the other in good faith and authenticity.

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We could use plenty of that in America and in the Presbyterian Church USA.

Last week's most visible – and in some ways emblematic - example of what faces our denomination was the question of how marriage would be defined. The committee that studied many overtures on the subject to the assembly presented a recommendation that our Directory of Worship should be changed to define marriage as being between “two people” from its current definition of being between a man and a woman.

For those who seek the full measure of equality for gays and lesbians, the question is a pressing one. They fear any delay on the question of marriage costs the denomination allies and members of the LGBT community who have been waiting patiently. Other supporters of the change feel it is an urgent matter of fairness and justice, one that defines whether our welcome to all God's children is truly inclusive.

On the other hand, many believed that this is not the time for even a proposed change in the definition of marriage. On the heels of the decision to ordain qualified gays and lesbians, they believed such action would accelerate the exodus of members and churches who believe our denomination is abandoning what they see as the Biblical and confessional witness to traditional marriage. A third alternative was to give pastors in states where same-gender marriage is legal by civic statutes the discretion to conduct such a ceremony.

In the end, the assembly narrowly defeated the proposal to change the definition of marriage, by a 52-to-48-percent margin. It did call our denomination into a two-year discussion and period of discernment regarding the meaning of Christian marriage in our church. The outcomes and sentiments of these discussions are to be reported back to the next national meeting of the denomination two years from now.

So, now, the denomination waits to see what happens. Churches representing as many as 300,000 members have begun the process of leaving the denomination or have indicated they would be watching what happened last week before making up their minds. Estimates vary but close observers predict a loss of 7% to 10% of our denomination's members, about what other major denominations have lost over many of the same issues. That is the potential “what” of what we may see in the next two years or so.

More important than the what, though, is the “how.” “How” will we engage with each other, the written Word of God and with the Holy Spirit as we continue to discuss our differences? “How” will we witness to the world the honesty of our relationships and the integrity of our identity as God’s people ... God’s many kinds of people, old, middle aged and young, of all races and ethnicities, rich and poor, gay and straight, church-loving and church-questioning, content traditionalists and forward-pushing progressives, lifelong Presbyterians and those who have just discovered the richness of our ways?

In other words, how will we understand both our power and our powerlessness as we continue to navigate historic change in the church – from something we’ve all known and perhaps questioned into something we do not yet see.

Will we cling to the ways of worldly power – or claim the power that is made perfect in weakness? Will we identify and name the thorns in our side as individuals and as a denomination, thorns of pride, close-mindedness and self-righteousness? Will we, like Paul, go not to ourselves but to the God we know in the cross to understand the purpose of our thorns and rediscover the power of perfect love in Christ?

Will we submit humbly to the truth that, as Hugh McColl learned, worldly power does not always guarantee control or predictable outcomes? Will we surrender to the promise that God’s grace in Christ is sufficient, all sufficient, as we do the hard work of staying and re-building our denomination from the ground up?

The good news, my friends – as if we needed any more than that – is that here at Caldwell we know something about loss and rebuilding, about destruction and reconstruction and how, sometimes, we can be healed by our hardship.

We know what it means to find God’s power in moments of weakness. We know that when worldly power fails to deliver the control we seek, we can find divine power and sufficient grace in the cross and the open tomb. We know that when we feel the thorns’ pricks of persecution and disappointment we are closest to both the hope and the power of Christ that dwells in each of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.