

**Boasting in Our Weakness**  
**Reverend Tom Robinson**  
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Two weeks ago, when I was working on this worship service two weeks ahead of time because I was going to be on study leave, I had no idea I would be my own sermon illustration.

As many of you know, two days before that study leave ended, I went out for an early morning run and was tripped up by something protruding from the ground. I had a pretty good idea of what I had done when I fell, and a classmate's gracious generosity in getting me to a hospital ER confirmed my amateur diagnosis – a separated shoulder.

I have heard about such things and I have gone to the hospital to be with people in such conditions. But this was a first as far as personal experience for me. It could have been put off for a while - like a lifetime - and that would have been just fine for me. But just like God told Paul, I had this message - My grace is sufficient for you.

Not that I'm bragging, you understand. A broken body is not the way we usually understand bragging. We usually think of that as someone who brags about their exploits, things they have accomplished, great triumphs they have achieved. But falling down and messing up your bone structure? No bragging rights there.

One thing it does, though - it makes you a lot more understanding about folks who have to go through times like that. Being in an ER when you are the one being worked on does wonders to your compassion and your empathy. It broadens your horizons as you reflect on what it is like to be broken, to be vulnerable, to have to depend on someone else to get you around; to experience what it feels like when your body cannot do all the things you have taken for granted.

In other words, it serves to educate you on what it means to be weak. We have just come off our great national holiday, and one of the things we celebrate during this time is our national strength. We hear concerts, we see fireworks, we hear presentations about our nation's glorious history. And in most of that is a celebration of strength. One of this nation's great military figures, General George S. Patton, once said that "Americans love a winner, and will not tolerate a loser. The very thought of losing is hateful for an American. That is why America never has lost a war."

We in this community know all about the great desire for strength, and for winning. Every fall we get out there and root for the Avon Lake Shoremen, or the Avon Eagles. Winning is fun; it's great to cheer for friends or family who are out there accomplishing great things. When it becomes an every year thing, when going deep into the playoffs is an expectation, it is even more fun and exciting.

But life isn't always about winning and being cheered. Sometimes life is more like getting tripped up and winding up in the ER. Or about losing your job and having to join a

group of other folks who are out of work and trying to help each other with elevator speeches or resumes. Or dealing with tragedies in your family. Sometimes life is not about winning at all; it is more about how do we deal with losing, with the weaknesses that we all have, and trusting that God can still work through our limitations to bring something great into being.

When Paul was writing this letter to the Corinthians, he was not dealing from a position of strength. Some folks had been complaining about him. Oh, he's not all that great, they said. He's not like this super apostle I know of in the next town; he doesn't do so many exorcisms, he doesn't speak in tongues all that well, he is not a great miracle worker, he is not a gifted speaker. They had all kinds of reason why Paul's weaknesses were too evident for him to be of much good.

Paul then goes into an account of a certain person he knows – wink, wink – and we all know he is really talking about himself. But we don't really know where he is going with all of this. He may be getting ready to stick it to his critics and say “here you go, here are my credentials for being even better than your so-called super apostle.” But he doesn't do that. He just goes unnamed in his account, and then just when you would think he would pile on his credentials he seems to undercut his authority by bringing up his painful physical ailment. Biblical scholars down through the years have been trying to figure out what this was, what was Paul's “thorn in the flesh” as it reads in the King James Version. Was it some eye ailment, because he alludes to that in other letters? Was it some psychological issue, or marital distress, or sexual orientation confusion? All of these have been offered.

But we don't know exactly what it was. We only know it was a torment for Paul. And we also know that he kept asking God to get rid of it for him. We know all about that – Hey, God, if you are all loving and kind and good, how about making my life a little easier? Why not heal my body or my soul or my spirit? Why do I have to do all the work? Why do I have all of these things that happen to me?

I know all about those things. I said quite a few of them myself last week. But what we come back to is God's answer to Paul in the midst of his weakness, in the midst of his pain: My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is strongest when you are weak.

It's nice to be strong. It's great to be a winner. But you cannot always be strong. Sometimes life reminds you that you are not in charge, you are not in control, that you are not as strong as you thought you were. In those times, we need to remember that God is there and God lifts us up in those times of weakness, because it is in those times of weakness when we have no one else to lean on. All we have is God's grace. But that is enough.

This morning we celebrate both of our sacraments, and when you come down to it they are both occasions of weakness. One of the things I like best about the ways that we usually celebrate baptism is that it is for infants – or in this case, a one year old. They are cute, they are wonderful, but they are weak. They don't know why they are here, they cannot figure it out. They are only here to receive the water, to receive the means of grace. Hopefully as they get

older the sacrament will take on meaning for them. For now, they receive these waters as symbols of grace, pure gift of a loving God who gives us what we need long before we realize how much we need it.

The sacrament of communion is a celebration of our Lord's Supper on the last night he was with his disciples. It was a time of great weakness. He was about to be crucified, they were about to betray, deny and abandon him. And yet in spite of all of that, Jesus took the bread and the cup, and down through the years we have done the same, in remembrance of him. In remembrance of his weakness. In remembrance of the grace of God which sustains us in our times of utmost brokenness.

We do this because at the depths of life's dark valleys we remember that "My grace is sufficient for you." We are deeply thankful for that grace, that comes to us whether we deserve it or not. It comes to us and redeems our lives and our situations, and lets new life occur. Amen.

Bible Text is 2 Corinthians 12:2-10.

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