

The 7th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: July 8, 2018

Proper 9: 2Corinthians 12:2-10: *Vigor in Arduis/Strength in Adversity*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I saw one of the most highly praised motion pictures of 2017 titled *Darkest Hour*. It was about Winston Churchill. As one of the prominent statesmen of the twentieth century, Winston Churchill achieved what others only dream of. He courageously led Great Britain to fight against the tyranny of Adolph Hitler. As renowned and successful as he was, however, Winston Churchill had his struggles. As a young man, Churchill was confronted with two big challenges. First, he suffered a speech impediment, a lisp caused by a dental condition. But this did not stop him from becoming a celebrated public speaker. I read somewhere that he often wore an artificial tooth, designed to ease this impediment. He also avoided words in his speeches that he had difficulty pronouncing. Yet his speeches were both inspiring and motivating.

The second obstacle Churchill had to overcome was a mental health challenge. He called it the “Black Dog.” Winston Churchill suffered severe bouts of clinical depression from his youth until his death. The condition became especially severe during times of military setbacks. Nevertheless, Churchill wouldn’t allow this condition to stop him from carrying out his duties as Prime Minister. He believed the needs of his country came before his personal needs. It is most interesting that, despite his speech impediments, Churchill went on to become one of history’s greatest inspirational speakers. And, despite his depression, he was an inspiring leader. Churchill had what I call, from the Latin *Vigor in Arduis*, translation *Strength in Adversity*.

My sisters and brothers, all of us have weaknesses. Some of our weaknesses are physical, some are mental, and some are moral. Some of these weaknesses have to do with our work, some with our family life, and some with our relationship with Jesus Christ. Some of us, for example, have short tempers, others lack diplomacy. Some of us are too proud, others lack a back-bone. There are no perfect “10s.” Maybe that is just as well.

Saint Paul had his weaknesses. One weakness in particular caused him much heartache. We don’t know for certain what it was. He called it his “thorn in the flesh.” Some scripture scholars have suggested that St. Paul suffered from

epileptic seizures. In St. Paul's day there was no medication to control seizures. If epilepsy was his thorn in the flesh, he was literally stuck with it.

St. Paul prayed that God would deliver him from his affliction. Three times he asked God about this matter, but God's answer to him was, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" Paul prayed about his "thorn in the flesh" three times, then let it go and trusted it to God. God was saying to Paul, "Trust me, Paul. I will take care of you. But I can use your weakness to demonstrate my power." And God did use Paul's weaknesses in a wonderful way. Paul's influence over the Christian community has been second only to Jesus Christ himself. Remember, St. Paul was the founder of the Christian Church. No wonder. Look at how strong Paul's faith was in God.

We can learn from Paul's experience. Paul not only learned to accept his thorn, he even began to boast about this weakness in order to show the power of Jesus. Paul, by God's grace, turned his weakness into strength. *Vigor in arduis/ strength in adversity.* And so we contemporary disciples can do the same as St. Paul. We can turn our weaknesses into strength.

Here are a few principles we can apply to our weaknesses: First of all, a weakness can become strength, if we do not give in to it. As someone has said,

“Some people succeed because they are destined to succeed, but most people succeed because they are determined to succeed.” It might be a physical weakness or a disability that is your thorn in the flesh.

Author Irving Stone spent a lifetime studying greatness, writing biographies of such men as Michelangelo, Vincent van Gogh, Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin. Stone was once asked if he had found a thread that ran through the lives of all these exceptional people. He said, “I write about people who sometime in their life have a vision or dream of something that should be accomplished and they go to work. “They are beaten over the head, knocked down, vilified and for years they get nowhere. But every time they’re knocked down they stand up. You cannot destroy these people. And at the end of their lives they’ve accomplished some modest part of what they set out to do.” If you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember these truisms. First, it’s not where you start in life. It is all about where you finish in life. Also, it is neither too late nor impossible with God.

St. Paul had that kind of attitude, that kind of determination. Besides his “thorn in the flesh,” who can forget the other obstacles he faced in his ministry? Paul writes, “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones,

three times I was shipwrecked, and I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.” Yet, Paul never ever quit. Paul found *Vigor in arduis/ strength in adversity.*

Paul’s experiences convince me, most of all, that our weaknesses may become strengths if they remind us of our dependence on God. It would have been easy for Paul to boast of his influence on the early Christian community, but he knew that the glory did not belong to him. His weaknesses should have condemned him to failure. But, only by the grace of God could he make his life count. And he did so in a magnificent way.

Let me tell you a story that has become a metaphor for me for the kind of life Paul lived. Do you know the story of young Ricky Hoyt? Ricky has been disabled from birth and yet in 1989 he and his father participated in a national Ironman competition. A typical Ironman Triathlon consists of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bicycle ride and a 26.2 marathon. It is grueling and it is

beyond belief. Ricky knew he would get lots of skeptical looks on the race course. He also knew the winners would probably cross the finish line hours ahead of him. His goal would be to finish, even if it took all day, even if he had to cross the finish line in the dark.

Robert Reccord and Randy Singer in their book *Made to Count, Discovering What To Do with Your Life* describe Ricky's Hoyt's ordeal beautifully. Here is how they describe this amazing feat: "Ricky Hoyt was born with cerebral palsy. He finished the race just one second ahead of his 49 year old father. Ricky's dad swam through 2.4 miles of open ocean pulling Ricky behind him in a rubber raft, then pedaled an oversized 58 pound bike for 112 miles with Ricky sitting in a basket on the front, then pushed Ricky in a special cart for the 26.2-mile running marathon.

My brothers and sisters, all the self-help books and motivational sayings in the world could not have carried Ricky through that race. It was the love and strength of a father that took Ricky where he could not go alone. Isn't that a beautiful metaphor for the life of faith? Frank Sinatra may have sung, "I Did It My Way," But no one truly succeeds in life on their own. Self-made man? Self-made woman? It's a myth. There are actually very few worthwhile goals in life you can achieve on your own. The truth of the matter is that true

success only comes to the man or woman who realizes that, try our hardest, we are only truly successful when we realize that a loving Father is towing our raft, that a loving Father is pedaling our bicycle, that a loving Father is pushing our cart. And if you have not come to that realization, maybe that is why you are so dissatisfied with your life and why even when the world acclaims you as a success you feel so empty. You are trying to live your life without God.

That is the lesson St. Paul learned. Can you hear Paul testifying about what God had done in his life? “Look at me,” he would say, “I once persecuted Christians. Look at me, a man who has to battle this humiliating affliction this thorn in the flesh. Yet Christ has used me to plant churches all over the known world.” Paul was a man of tremendous intellect. He was also a man of unquestionable persuasive powers. Perhaps if it had not been for his thorn in the flesh, he would have leaned upon his own ability rather than the power of God working through him. And you and I would never have heard the name of Paul of Tarsus.

That’s the way life works. Paul’s weakness became his strength. Paul’s scar became a star. Paul’s hurt became a halo. Here is the challenge for this week: The same thing can happen to us, if we don’t give into our weakness, and then

our weaknesses will cause us to depend upon God. *Vigor in arduis/strength in adversity.* It is not how you start. It is all about how you finish and always remember, it is never too late with God because nothing is impossible with God. AMEN.