

“Strong in the Broken Places”
Deuteronomy 10:12-13 and 17-21 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

On this Independence Day weekend it is appropriate for us to reflect together on the heritage we share as citizens of this nation. One of the themes we often hear is that “freedom is not free,” and it is a helpful reminder to us to be grateful for all the freedoms we are tempted to take for granted.

There are two American authors that provide quotations that focus on the paradox of strength that comes from great sacrifice, even times of great tragedy and suffering. The first is from Maya Angelou a poet who is still living: “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived but, if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” The other quote comes from a novelist Ernest Hemingway: “Life breaks all of us, but some of us are strong in the broken places.”

Strong in the broken places. I would like for us to focus on that theme as we prepare to celebrate the Lord’s supper together. My hope is that these words will contain at least a little bit of encouragement for any of us who have been visited by anxiety or loss, pain or dread in recent weeks and months.

On this Fourth of July weekend I am reminded that even 150 years before the bold step of declaring independence the original settlers from Europe endured many hardships. At Plymouth in 1620 46 out of the original 102 pilgrims – almost half – perished from lack of fresh food and inability to fight off resulting diseases. Imagine the grief and regret many of them must have been experiencing – “Why did this seem like a good idea?” is a thought that must have plagued many of them. But despite all of this, from the very beginning, they set aside a time of worship to give thanks to God. That ultimately evolved into our Thanksgiving, but worship and giving thanks to God was a weekly part of their life. Can you imagine that, what if half the people on your street or half the people in your mobile home park passed away in the past year, but still you use the occasion to gather for worship to give thanks to God for all that remains and, even more than that, to exercise faith in the hope that God can restore all things.

I am still learning the history of this community, but I have come to know that at the very beginning of the settling of Palmetto in the 1800’s and in the life of this church that several times disease afflicted many in our community, even to the point where worship services and public gatherings were suspended for periods of time because of the risks. Gathering for worship and giving thanks is something for which we should always be thankful.

It is the power of the gospel that can make us strong in the broken places. The apostle Paul describes a personal experience of being made whole in brokenness. He talks about having what he refers to as a “thorn in the flesh”, we don’t know what it was but it caused him much suffering and he prayed to have it removed. This is what he says about it, “Three times I appealed to the Lord, that

it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:8-10) Paul knew by experience about the grace it takes to be strong in the broken places.

We hear a lot this weekend about the sacrifices made by those serving our country in uniform. When I get the chance I watch the nightly news report on PBS. At least once a week they conclude their report with an honor roll of those Americans in uniform who have lost their lives in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Perhaps you have seen it, their photographs along with name, rank, age, and hometown are displayed in silence. As I watch those photographs, all of them far younger than myself, one of things I pray about is for all their families to be made strong in their broken places. It is also a discipline just to remain in silence while they are remembered.

I want to take the time to tell the story of one man. His name is Hilbert Caesar. He is Latino and has learned much about being strong in the broken places and about power being made perfect in weakness. When the bomb went off on a road near Baghdad, Hilbert thought that his life was over. What he discovered was ... that it was just beginning.¹ Army Staff sergeant Caesar was with his platoon out on patrol in Iraq when a roadside bomb exploded. When the smoke cleared, Caesar looked down and saw that his right leg was severed in three places and just dangling by a piece of skin. He noticed that his machine gun was bent from the force of the blast. His first thought was, “Oh man. This is it. My life is over.”

But he didn't die. Sergeant Caesar was transported to safety. At Walter Reed Hospital, his missing limb was replaced with an artificial leg of plastic and steel. But still, he felt despair about his future. He was in pain and worried that he would never be able to run again, or be attractive to women. He has spent much time thinking about the reality that eight men from his platoon were killed in that attack. Hilbert Caesar said “Sometimes it takes people a whole lifetime to realize what life is all about ... you go through something like this and it has a way of growing you up a bit. I came to the realization that I may have only one leg now, but I also have a choice. I can remain in my bitterness or I can get better, and in order to get better I need to be grateful to God each day for being able to live my life.” Hilbert Caesar knows a lot about growing strong in the broken places. Such growth is inspirational but it also asks for an increased capacity for compassion from all of us, a kind of compassion that is willing to come along beside those in the midst of brokenness. That is a big part of what it means to experience Christ by seeking to minister with the least and most vulnerable among us.

¹ Reported in The Washington Post, November 26, 2005

That is just one man's story that could be multiplied many times over. It could be multiplied in the thousands for American men and women in uniform who have been wounded, but it also needs to be multiplied in the hundreds of thousands for the men and women of Iraq and Afghanistan and other countries who have been directly affected. As disciples of Jesus we are commanded to always include all peoples in our prayers and circles of compassion. Some experience more trauma, some less trauma, but where brokenness is concerned there is nothing to be gained in seeing who has suffered more or who has suffered less. But the unity of the gospel asks for courage on the part of all people of faith, the courage to witness to our faith, more than just by what we say but also by the values we embody in our lives, values that reflect a marriage of both creativity and compassion.

On this Independence Day weekend an increasing number of our neighbors live in unsettling circumstances that they had no way of predicting last year at this time. Yesterday afternoon as we helped the Youth Group park cars for the 4th of July we noted what a difference a year makes. Unlike previous years when the parking lot was filled to overflowing this year it was only 2/3's full. We hear about statistics for unemployment and underemployment; each number is not just a statistic but it is a family that is being affected. To just say to our neighbors who are going through difficult times to buck up and be strong in the broken places is a hollow gospel. Our witness needs to be courageously expressed through creativity and compassion.

This morning as we celebrate the Lord's supper I want to ask each of you as you take the bread to especially remember that it represents the broken body of Christ, and it is part of the human experience that we most graphically experience the love of Christ in our brokenness as well.

Think of a time when you have experienced spiritual growth. A shift in priorities. An increase in personal strength. A renewed appreciation for life. A deepening of personal relationships. Have these times of growth been the result of smooth sailing and easy living? If so, you are the exception. It is far more often the case that spiritual growth comes from seasons and circumstances of loss and stress and struggle and suffering. It is then that we gain the willingness to be shifted from self-reliance to God-reliance.

The story is told of a Renaissance artist who was very famous for creating the most beautiful, prized vases in the world. A young man had a great desire to learn this artist's craft so he came to observe his method as an apprentice. The artist labored for many weeks with one piece of clay – shaping it, firing it, painting it, baking it, all these steps done with the utmost care and precision. Then he placed it on a pedestal for inspection. The apprentice sat in awe at this vase of great beauty yet he had the intuitive feeling that the artist was holding something back, and his intuition was absolutely accurate for after letting the vase cure for several weeks, it appeared that the artist was not yet finished. In a shocking

move one day he went into the studio, carefully swept the floor, then lifted the vase off the pedestal and deliberately dropped it on the floor and it shattered into a thousand shards. And then quietly, and just as meticulously, he gathered each of the pieces and over the next week he reconnected each of them by painting them with a paint of pure gold so that each crack reflected glistening invaluable gold. In the end, it was in the imperfection of this piece that its beauty became not only radiant but strong again as well.

It is difficult to speak of our brokenness with each other, but it is still there. God can use you to speak encouragement to one another, to witness to how God has mended and is mending the broken places in our lives.

Let them know that God's grace was sufficient for you and shall also be for them as well.

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

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Rev Stephen G Hoffman