

Strong at the Broken Places

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Crossroads Christian Church

Mark 6:1-13

Pentecost 6 B July 5, 2015

You may remember that last week's sermon title was from Neil Diamond and "Sweet Caroline." Today's is from Ernest Hemingway, in his book *A Farewell to Arms*. It goes, "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places."¹ Depressing, huh? But we've all experienced at least a little bit of brokenness, and grown from it, and we all know of people who have faced shattered lives and broken bodies, who have responded with grace, courage, and strength. We all try to live comfortable, protected, sheltered lives, but we all know that terrible things can interrupt those lives and maybe remake them forever. Yet even when that happens, God gives us strength to get through.

Yesterday we celebrated our nation's 139th birthday. Our nation is strong; truly a super power, economically and militarily. Even in economically tough times we have a higher standard of living than most of the world. It's important to remember, when we're thanking God for our blessings, when we're remembering those spacious skies, those amber waves of grain, those purple mountains majesty, that our prosperity and freedom came with the price of suffering.

If we go back 150 years before the American Revolution, to Plymouth Colony, we discover that after enduring brutal winters, nearly half of the colonists died, either of illness or hunger. Yet they hung in there; they persevered. The signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4 was followed by another cruel winter, where George Washington and his troops made winter quarters at Valley Forge; again starvation and illness plagued the soldiers. The story would go on from there, as soldiers endured hardships on the battlefields, as settlers endured hardships during the westward expansion. Dr. Robert Franklin, an African-American minister and educator, president of Morehouse College, puts it this way: "The Americans who dined at the earliest Thanksgiving feasts did not live to see the Revolutionary War that would move us from a colony to an independent republic. Nor could they have imagined that our same young nation could be torn asunder a hundred years later in a cataclysmic Civil War. But soldiers in every war have paused when they could to eat and to give thanks. Think about it. In the 1600s, Americans fought the elements to survive. During the 1700s, Americans fought the British for their independence. In the 1800s, Americans fought one another over the moral issue of slavery. And during the 1900s, Americans fought international powers to protect

¹ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, Scribner, 1929

freedom in the world.

In the early days of the 21st century, a divided nation would begin the slow march toward healing and unity. Hard economic times both exposed our best instincts and core values as we shared our bounty--and our deepest fears--as some citizens harbored hatred and prejudice based upon unchangeable, God-given differences. Then, on 9/11, we were shaken to our collective core when a fateful attack killed several thousand. I am proud to say, however, that in the fashion of our forefathers and mothers--with God as a directing force--we rallied to make sense of and learn from that devastating day in world history. The odd blessing is that millions of Americans and billions around the world united in what Dr. King called "an inescapable network of destiny."² (unquote)

We are strong as a nation because we have been tested, time and time again. We've become strong at the broken places. Actually, that phrase of Hemingway's came to my mind as I read the words of our scripture from Paul's Second letter to the Corinthians. Paul loved the Christians in the seaport city of Corinth dearly, but they drove him crazy! They were an enthusiastic bunch, always going off on some wild theological tangent, or bending the rules of Christian living to a breaking point. They not only pushed the envelope, they ripped right through it. They had a way of getting on Paul's last nerve.

Paul had to reel them in constantly back to his Gospel, because they were always finding new improved glitzy gospels with more bells and whistles, the latest theological fads. They swallowed the pitches of various hucksters, the televangelists of his day, and in the process, they basically said that Paul's gospel was insufficient and that Paul wasn't all that good a minister and teacher, anyway. What were they teaching? We don't know all the details, but reading between the lines gives us this: To be sure that you are saved as a Christian, you have to follow the Jewish laws, too. Salvation by grace through faith wasn't good enough. Since Christianity had arisen out of Judaism, this made sense on the surface. And it was tempting, because it put control of the process of salvation back into our hands.

Throughout Second Corinthians, Paul pulls out all the arguments he can to help his flock understand what Christianity was really all about. He says in 4:5, "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." But by the time he gets to Chapter 12, he has to proclaim himself, even though he's uncomfortable doing it. He opens the deepest part of his soul and lays out on the table for all the world to see, his innermost spiritual experience. Have you ever had

² Unable to find source.

an overwhelming sense of God's presence in your life but were afraid to tell anyone about it because you were afraid they might explain it away or dismiss it? It takes courage to talk about such things. So Paul puts it in the third person—"I know a person in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven"—that would be the highest spiritual ecstasy—he didn't know if it was a bodily experience or a vision—but what he experienced there in paradise was beyond words. Words would just be too shallow, too vague to describe the awesome presence of God. In the presence of God, he asked for relief from a serious physical problem, his famous but mysterious "thorn in the flesh"—his broken place. Some say it was epilepsy, some say a vision problem, some say shingles, some say a bodily deformity, but we'll never really know. But God's response is a gentle let-down. "My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in weakness." Strong in the broken places. So Paul boasts of his weakness, because God's power and love can shine through.

It's a lesson here that God doesn't always give us what we want, but God does give us what we need. Paul wanted healing; healing would have been wonderful; a great release from a debilitating problem. But it was more important to be that treasure in a clay vessel, to use his weakness to allow others to see God's greatness.

Gary Harbaugh, a pastoral counselor, has written about becoming faith-hardy Christians.³ Hardiness is a psychological concept, having to do with resilience to stress and trauma. Faith-hardy Christians have a faith that has given them resilience to deal with terrible trauma. Paul was a faith-hardy Christian because he could find God's strength in his own weakness. Faith hardiness isn't something you have or don't have; it's something we develop as we invite God's Spirit to work in our lives. We grow into it, as we grow in our trust in God.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus gave a good example of this. He had been rejected and questioned in Nazareth, his own home town. They hadn't seen anything special in him all those years when he was growing up. Some people would have been discouraged at the setback. But Jesus met rejection by trying again. It would be learning-by-doing time for his disciples. When Jesus sent out his disciples into the countryside to proclaim the good news of God's coming reign, he didn't want them to be dependent upon the provisions they took with them, like food and money. He wanted them to be dependent—not upon themselves, not just upon others, but upon God, to grow in being faith-hardy.

³ Gary Harbaugh, *The Faith-Hardy Christian*, Augsburg, 1993.

Likewise, God calls us to trust and to love, to reach out in faith, to grow in our faith-hardiness. Then we, like Paul, can say "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

by Michael E. Dixon