

“Drawing on God’s Own Strength”

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Proper 9-B, August 4, 2015

Even if you never have seen the Broadway Musical “Annie Get Your Gun,” written by Rogers and Hammerstein, you probably are familiar with the words to a song from that stage play, written by Irving Berlin in 1946, entitled: **“Anything You Can Do.”** The words of this song set the stage for a **climatic sharpshooting contest** that will then follow between **Annie Oakley and Frank Butler**. The words go like this: “Anything you can do, I can do better! I can do anything better than you! No you can’t! Yes I can! No you can’t! Yes I can! Anything you can do I can do better! I can do anything better than you!”

Every time I read these magnificent words from the 12th chapter of 2 Corinthians I usually think of that song, because here we find the Apostle Paul unfortunately coerced into some sort of the **theological sharpshooting contest** with some false teachers who have unfortunately wormed their way in to the Corinthians congregation. Though Paul was the founding pastor of that church; these **“super-apostles”** as he refers to them rather **sarcastically** in the previous chapter; chapter 11, verse 5 have done their best to **discredit the Apostle Paul, casting doubts even upon the validity of his apostleship**. They are saying such things, perhaps, that Paul was not a part of Jesus’ first twelve disciples; never mind the fact, that the **Risen and Glorified Christ** appeared to Saul of Tarsus personally on the day of his conversion on the road to Damascus.

Back in chapter 3, Paul is responding to their request for some letters of recommendation, validating his apostleship. And though St. Paul may have been tempted to tell them all to **go jump in a lake**, he refrained from doing so! Paul said to the whole church this time: *“What do you need with letters of recommendation? For you yourselves, are our letter of recommendation, written upon our hearts, to be known and read by all”* (v. 2)! Paul was reminding them that he had preached the Gospel to them and through the Spirit’s power they came to believe that the Gospel was true! What greater need would they have therefore of letters of recommendation?

Next, these super-apostles wanted to boast of the fact that they had been given some marvelous visions and spiritual experiences that they were contending no doubt had to be much greater than any kind of spiritual visions or spiritual experiences than the Apostle Paul ever could have had!

Do catch on to the idea of what is really going on here my friends; a real tit-for-tat!?! **“Anything you can do, I can do better!** I can do anything better than you! No you can’t! Yes I can! No you can’t! Yes, I can! Anything you can do, I can do better I can do anything better than you!”

Paul initially **doesn’t want to take the bait!** But he feels forced into it! Paul is hesitant to take the bait because he certainly learned that the **prideful arrogance he was possessed with prior to his conversion, did not serve him well!**

“I must go on boasting! Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will now go on to visions and revelations of the Lord!” Here in the hopes of diverting attention away from himself, even while remaining engaged in the sharpshooting theological contest, Paul begins to refer to himself and his experience in the third person singular, by using the pronoun “he.” *“I*

know of a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses” (2 Corinthians 12:2-5).

Everything that usually happens in a **good game of one-upmanship** seems to be taking place here. But then, all of sudden, Paul’s argument takes on a whole different character!

Paul is no longer boasting of his accomplishments, or of his achievements and the great visions and spiritual experiences that he has had up to this point in his spiritual life! Quite the contrary, Paul does something that no ordinary human being, apart from their relationship with Jesus Christ, would ever do. Paul begins to boast of his weaknesses!

Paul says, “So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated! Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me, but he said to me: “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:7)

Paul himself had, at one point, unfortunately become the target of one of those fiery darts of the evil one that he warn us about in Ephesians 6, when Paul writes in verse 16, **“In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one!”**

God was certainly not this source of this adversity that now had come to the Apostle Paul in his life, Satan was! But God in his sovereignty was also willing to allow Paul to struggle with this affliction whatever it was, not only to keep him humble, but to convince him that the powerful tasks he was accomplishing in his ministry were not the result of his own astuteness and proficiency! No, they were the result of God’s grace at work in his life!

Of course there have been all sorts of discussions about the nature of particular thorn in Paul’s side. Some have suggested that it may have been some type of physical affliction, like poor eyesight, malaria, arthritis, or perhaps even migraine headaches. We don’t know for sure. Others have suggested that this thorn in the flesh was the temptation to some sin that constantly plagued him; maybe a temptation that in the weakness of his own human flesh he succumbed to from time to time! Paul does say in Romans 7, “I do not understand my own actions, for the good that I would do, I don’t do, and the evil that I don’t want to do, that is what I do! Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death! Thanks be to God who gives us the victory in our Lord Jesus Christ!”

Yet, what Paul says next is nothing that any unbelieving person would ever be able to say in their lives: “Therefore will I boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong!” (V. 9b-10)

Brothers and sisters these are some of my favorites words of the Apostle Paul that appear in the New Testament; which in addition to being Paul's words, of course, are also God's own inspired Word!

And yet these words sound absolutely ludicrous to anyone whose life is still held captive to sin, whose personal belief system is shaped by primarily by this fallen world; and who even though they say they do not believe in him and that he does even exist; they are constantly giving themselves over to the temptations of the devil; the evil one.

Satan's goal in the life of a human being is never to humble us so that we come to see our great need for our daily reliance upon God our Heavenly Father and for his Word and his presence in our lives to guide and direct us. No, Satan's goal is always to make us proud, to make us arrogant; to make us haughty and unsympathetic to the plight of other human beings all around us!

That's why the words of St. Paul in our epistle lesson would sound absolutely ludicrous to those who according to St. Paul's diagnosis in Ephesians are still: *"Spiritually dead through their trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1).*

We live in a world and in a culture today, of course, that celebrates power; where power is a virtue and weakness is an anathema! We don't like to talk about weakness! We prefer to about our strengths! In our culture we have a fixation with being strong. When you go for a job interview, prospective employers may ask you about your strengths and weaknesses, but who wants to talk about their weaknesses? The Fifth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States guarantees that we never have to say anything to incriminate ourselves; not even in a court of law! If a prospective employer asks you about your weaknesses you can simply "Plead the fifth!"

We live in a world that constantly celebrates power and strength and fortitude and gumption, but certainly not weakness, or weaknesses!

And now to make a correlation to the physical realm, I wonder how many people here are family with those infomercials that come on television advertising the last physical fitness programs that can be bought from such companies like "Beach Body" out on the west coast of California. The exercise programs are all captured on DVD's and sent to your home so that it is almost like having personal trainers right there with you in your living room. The more recent programs have probably been "**P-X-90,**" or "**Insanity,**" or even much more currently "**Body Beast!**"

But you know these types of exercise programs are not really anything that is all that new! Some of you may be old enough to remember those ads that used to appear in the newspapers and magazines all across the USA that stated: "**I was once a 97-pound weakling, but then I found the Charles Atlas Bodybuilding Course, and look at me now!**"

There was always a "before" and an "after" portrait of the man who had bulked up through the use of Charles Atlas Bodybuilding program. All of this started back in 1922 when an American man of Italian descent named **Angelo Siciliano legally changed his name to Charles Atlas**, not only because of the great transformation that came over his own body due to an exercise routine for himself that he had established, but also because a friend of his **complimented him one day by telling him he now resembled the statue of Atlas that was then affixed on the top of a hotel on Coney Island.**

We live in a world today that celebrates strength where weakness is an anathema! In our culture weakness is to be discouraged and even joked about. We always see weaknesses as bad news! We don't like to focus on our weaknesses! When being interviewed for a new job by a prospective employer we don't want to tell them about our weaknesses? Why should we? After all the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution says that we never have to do anything or say anything that will incriminate ourselves; not even in a court of law. We can simply plead the fifth! How many people are really willing to tell a prospective employer about their weaknesses?

Jesus often talks to us about the dangers of pride in his teachings. In one of his parables he tells us about a Pharisee, who walked into the temple, and went to the front of the temple that day, whereupon standing there he beat his chest, praying, "I thank thee that I am not like other men, adulterers, extortionists, or tax collectors... I fast twice a week and I give 1/10, a tithe of all I receive to the Lord very faithfully!

BUT BY CONTRAST PAUL, IN OUR EPISTLE LESSON TODAY, BOAST OF HIS WEAKNESSES. It is a deep personal awareness of his own weaknesses that empowers him to come before God in prayer, and in response to God's own invitation, to draw on God's own strength!

Paul relied on God's grace to make his ministry and his ministry efforts sufficient for the day! Because of the promise of God's grace at work in his life he had the guts to attempt to do things for Jesus that he would have never had the nerve to do simply as one who was relying on his own limited sense of human power.

Paul knew that the Gospel was the power of God unto salvation for all who believed, for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Romans 1:16), but Paul also knew that God is willing to strengthen us in the acknowledgment of our weaknesses before him, so that Christ's life may still today actually become manifest to the world through ours!

This is why Paul said to the Philippians, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!*" This is why Paul says to the Ephesians, "*Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might!*" This is why Paul said to a young pastor named Timothy one day: "*God has not given us a spirit of timidity and fear, but of power and of love and of self-control!*" (2 Timothy 1:7)

Sometimes God answers our prayers with a "yes." Sometimes God answers our prayers with a "no." Sometimes God answers our prayers with a "not now, but maybe later" response. **But Paul's prayer for this thorn of the flesh to be removed from his side was answered three times clearly with a "no." But God would use Paul's own perceived limitations to empower him to trust God all the more and to venture out and do things for Jesus Christ he would never have dreamed of doing without his need to experience this kind of reliance always upon the Triune God and his free grace.**

Let's not forget either the prayer that our Savior prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his Passion! He fell down on his knees and prayed fervently, "***Father if there is any way possible, remove this cup from me! But your will, not my will be done!***" **And we know that the Father answered the Son with the word "no."** But along with that "no" God the Father **supplied the Son with the strength he needed to go to that cross, to die for our sins,** and to be raised again as victor and conqueror over death and the grave, to bring us the forgiveness of all our sins, life and salvation!

I know I am fast running out of time, but have you ever heard the statement: "If life hands you lemons, make lemonade?" Sometimes attempting to do things we never dreamed we could do ends up surprising us. Jesus told us that this is how faith works in our lives. Jesus said, "***If you had even a mustard-seed sized faith, you could say to that mulberry bush over there, be uprooted and cast into the sea! and it would obey you!***" Yes, Jesus is speaking figuratively here and still today faith moves mountains because in this faith God pours into our hearts through the Gospel, he enables us to draw on God's own strength still today. **That's why those who mourn can be comforted, and those who are poor in spirit will inherit the kingdom of God and the merciful will receive mercy, etc. in Jesus' lovely beatitudes given to us in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:12)**

In Psalm 84 we read, “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, O God, in whose hearts are the highway to Zion!” In Psalm 68 we read, “God is the one who gives strength to his people!”

Well, with all the seriousness of our discussion this morning, I wanted to end this sermon on a little lighter note. That’s why I am going to close this sermon by telling you a true story that I came across years ago in connection with our text about how God may bring something positive out of a negative experience in life.

The year was 1904 and there was a young man living in Wisconsin named Clarence. One day he took his girlfriend on a summer outing. They brought a picnic lunch to a very picturesque island in the middle of a small lake. She wore a long dress with about a dozen petticoats. He was dressed in a fine suit with a high collar. Clarence rowed them out to the island, dragged the boat onto shore, and spread their picnic blanket beneath a shade tree. **He was so hypnotized by his girlfriend’s beauty that he hardly noticed the hot sun and sweat on his brow. Softly she whispered to him, “Clarence, honey, you forgot the ice cream!”**

Clarence pulled the boat back into the water and rowed to shore. He found a grocery store nearby, bought the ice cream, and rowed back to the island. She batted her long eyelashes over her deep blue eyes and purred, “Clarence, honey, you forgot the chocolate syrup!”

Love will make you do some pretty strange things! So Clarence got back into the boat and returned to the store for chocolate syrup. As he rowed back toward the island, however, he suddenly stopped rowing and **just sat there in the middle of the lake that day. He sat there another hour before he made it back to his girlfriend on this island with the chocolate syrup. By the end of that afternoon, Clarence Evinrude had invented the first outboard motor and “Evinrude” is still a popular brand for outboard motors attached to all kinds of boats out there on Lake Murray today!**

Clarence Evinrude illustrated the point St. Paul teaches us in our epistle lesson today: **Life sometimes hands us problems that can, overtime, end up paying us some great dividends. Do you remember how those beautiful pearls are made in that tiny little oyster?** Initially a grain of sand gets into its shell, and the constant irritation of that sand on the oyster’s tender little body enables the oyster by God’s design to secrete a solution around that grain of sand that eventually turns it into a smooth and lovely pearl!

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in your weakness!’ Therefore shall I boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest upon me! For when I am weak, then I am strong!” Amen