

**Proper 9B 2012**  
**The Rev. Beth Maynard**  
**Church of the Redeemer, Chestnut Hill**

We've been going through excerpts from 2 Corinthians for our epistle readings this summer, and we're nearly to the end. I just reread the whole book last week, and it really struck me how of all Paul's letters, this has to be the one that is the most soaked in pain. Clearly the Corinthians were very close to his heart, but my goodness, they had a rocky relationship.

There are different efforts to reconstruct what exactly happened in Corinth and to connect that with the correspondence we have in the New Testament. 2 Corinthians in particular is a bit tough to sort out: some people think it might even contain more than one letter. Which, as a friend of mine would say, is the kind of speculation that's interesting if you're interested in it.

We do know some parts of the story for sure, though. Paul founded the church in Corinth, which was a wealthy, sophisticated seaport. Since his call was getting new churches started, he moved on after about 18 months; but soon a number of problems arose, the church asked for help, and he answered their questions with the letter we have in our Bibles as 1 Corinthians.

There were some intervening controversies involving one individual, and some of 2 Corinthians is addressing that. But we also know that eventually, new teachers came in who began to undermine Paul's work. They insulted him personally, saying he was a poor speaker and just generally unimpressive, but the real damage was done when they persuaded the church that Paul's whole teaching had been off base, that Jesus' message wasn't what he had taught them but something else. And everything began to unravel.

What we don't know is full details of what these teachers were promulgating. They were apparently very plausible and had great credentials -- Paul sarcastically calls them the Super Apostles. But you can infer some of their ideas from the things he says in our reading today, which comes from the section of the letter responding to them. There were probably several points of divergence, but it seems to me that one of the main issues was power and weakness.

While Paul over and over emphasizes vulnerable dependence on God, the Super Apostles painted Christianity as more about strength. They offered a religion of enhancement, a Jesus who would make your impressive center-city Corinth life even more impressive, and a program of uplifting spirituality. "Spiritual" seems to have been one of their buzzwords, in fact. "If you make yourself into a more spiritual person, your already fine life can be enhanced." Now this is destined to be a popular message, whatever century you preach it in.

I was listening a few weeks ago to a podcast in which a New Age leader was interviewing a Christian contemplative named Jim Finley, who's a psychotherapist and a Thomas Merton expert. Finley spoke from his own experience, which was deeply shaped by Jesus -- but did so, I thought, very accessibly and graciously in this inter-religious context.

The interviewer was open and gracious as well, but at one point she asked Finley a question that I found tremendously revealing. He had made several allusions to a point that clearly was totally foreign to her, and finally she stopped him for an explanation.

What she wanted clarified was why he seemed to see spiritual value in recognizing your brokenness. Why did he keep talking about surrendering his illusions of power? She just didn't grasp how this could have anything to do with what she understood spiritual growth to mean.

She went on to say, "Often I interview various [wisdom teachers] who talk about spiritual awakening and the emphasis more is just this breakthrough into the power of unitive consciousness... Things like [brokenness and powerlessness] are not normally referred to." And then she very sincerely asked, "Is [weakness] one of the unique qualities of the Christian... path?"

I was so struck by this -- because to me, everything Finley had said was pretty standard. Of course descriptions of Jesus meeting us in our brokenness are going to come up any time a Christian describes how God has drawn him into relationship. This is how we talk, as Christians, because of who we worship. And that's the way Paul had talked in Corinth, because of who Paul worshipped.

But what the Super Apostles offered was something more like what that interviewer was used to hearing from every other wisdom teacher she'd ever talked to. Breakthroughs into personal power! A spirituality of life enhancement! A growth program that skirts sin and suffering in favor of affirming yourself and celebrating spiritual progress. And all thanks to "Jesus." What's the problem?

Paul is almost frantic to lay out what he thinks the problem is. His concern jumps off the page. "They're fleecing you," he says; "that's not really Jesus they're talking about. I know they produced credentials, but I've got better ones; listen!" And despite his education and his pastoral track record, here's what he gives as his credentials: "Three times I have been beaten with rods; I've gone hungry; I was shipwrecked more than once, and then they stoned me ...."

It's like applying for a job by listing every reason you aren't qualified. Whatever makes you look bad. And he goes on enumerating what he calls his "weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities." It's a very long list. Now you can imagine the Super Apostles smiling tolerantly and murmuring, "And there's your problem. A spiritual person shouldn't have to be going through all that." But Paul disagrees. He disagrees because of who he worships.

And then you can almost see him remember that the buzzword of these new teachers is spirituality. They want breakthroughs and power? All right. So he sort of heaves a sigh and says, "There is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord." And this is where we come in today, where he takes the Super Apostles on their own playing field and finds a very unexpected, upside-down way to win.

"I know a man in Christ," Paul begins, "who fourteen years ago was caught up into the third heaven--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."

Paul's so sick of self-promotion he actually does this in the third person. He tells them: I know "a certain someone," OK? And "someone" had a mystical experience that makes your Super Apostles' life-enhancement spirituality look like watered down tonic water with no lime, and he heard words so transcendent he'll never tell what they were. Is that *spiritual* enough for you?

So in essence he's saying: I could out-power these people. I could out-credential them and out-impress them. I could out-spiritual enhancement them. But I'm not going to, because there is absolutely no grace and truth there. All that stuff is the death of grace.

And then Paul proves it by doing something really striking. One commentator calls it "the summit of the epistle." He suddenly pivots 180 degrees, back to where he knows Christ wants him, to the place where real grace lives. He confesses that in fact, he's had so many dramatic mystical experiences that he himself was in danger of falling into Super Apostle self-aggrandizement.

I, he says -- and here he will gladly use the first person! -- I was running the risk of becoming "too conceited, too elated by the abundance of revelations." But then "a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me."

Something unpleasant happened to Paul, something which over and over reminded him of the presence of evil and pain and suffering in our world because he had to meet it daily in his own body. An illness, an infirmity, nobody knows what it was, but something his first instinct was to ask God to free him from so that he could live more comfortably.

And the third time he asked, he had another of those amazing spiritual encounters. But this one was different. Once more God himself spoke, but in this case the words Paul heard were ones that he knows he has to share, because unlike that third heaven experience he was so leery of talking about, this message could never mislead anyone about where true spiritual power comes from. In fact, this message, this one sentence, has in it both the end of the self-absorbed folly of the Super Apostles, and the answer to all the Corinthians' confusion about the Gospel.

So this time he is glad to reveal what God said, because he wants the Corinthians to remember it for the rest of their lives. -- And so he writes it down, and so we have it today, and now we can remember it too. Here it is. "The Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"

"My grace is sufficient for you." I would rather have that than any narcissistic spiritual puffery from the third heaven, and I'd certainly rather have it than any unfulfillable promise that I can live a life where I just don't need grace all that much, because I can't.

"My power is made perfect in weakness." I would rather have that than a version of spiritual growth where I turn God into one more power tool for improving myself and getting what I want, and I would certainly rather have it than the attractive but ultimately cruel suggestion that I could be done with brokenness if I just applied myself.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." What Paul says to the Corinthians here is essentially the same thing Jim Finley told that interviewer. "Is [weakness] one of the unique qualities of the Christian path?" Yes.

Yes it is, because our weakness is the place where Christ's power truly comes into its own. Grace is grace because it goes all the way down, down to the depths, down to the pit. And when it does that for you, then you'll realize just how sufficient it really is. Thanks be to God for his glorious Gospel.