

Our world loves strength. Strength of body, strength of mind, strength of character. Being strong is important in our culture. Strong leaders are admired or at the very least respected. Muscle-bound actors are adored by millions of fans around the world. Athletes whose entire profession is based upon their physical strength and prowess make millions and millions of dollars and take on the status of national or even global icons. People with the strength to persevere through obstacles and challenges are lauded. Throughout much of the world military strength is a sign of importance and power. In most places throughout the world, the strong are in power, the strong dictate what policies are made, the strong dictate the directions of national and global economies, and often the strong get stronger at the expense of those weaker than they. It is the way of the world. Charles Darwin noted this concept as a basic precept of life on this planet, as it is the strongest of a species that survives, the strong are able to adapt and change. The strongest lion becomes the leader of the pack, the strongest animals rest at the top of the food chain, and on and on. This world seemingly runs on strength, it runs on power.

For many God and the Church function the same way. We hear stories in the Old Testament of God displaying his mighty power. We have hundreds of years of history where the Church wielded immense power over politics, land, armies you name it. Even over the last hundred years as the Church no longer held temporal power, the power of the Church as a force in culture and society was unassailable. The Church had immense power over cultural norms and social policy. For much of its history the Church bought into the world's obsession with power, with the world's belief that strength was definition of power. Even today as the Church's influence in the world wains in the Western world we continue to obsess over strength. We continue to long for the days when churches were full, we continue to long for the days when the church had influence over society, when politicians would listen to our bishops and influential lay people.

Into the midst of this culture of power and strength comes a different narrative from our Scripture readings today. Both our reading from Paul's Second letter to the Corinthians and our reading from Mark's Gospel, offer a different alternative to our world's obsession with strength and power, and offer us a glimpse into what real power looks like in the Kingdom of God. In our passage from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, we heard Paul recounting his glorious vision of his encounter with God, and instead of boasting about this Paul chooses to boast of his weakness. Paul writes "Therefore to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me...Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but [the Lord] said to me 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell within me." It is in our weakness, it is in our brokenness that we can truly experience the transformative power of Christ in our lives. If we insist on our own strength, if we insist on our own ways, our own plans that we can get by with just a little more effort or more practice than we are not open to God, we have chosen the world's version of strength and power over God's. When we as a Church harken for the days of influence and power in society, we have chosen the way of the world and not God's. When we as a Church allow our leaders to reward the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor and the oppressed, we have chosen the world's strength and not the power of God that is made perfect through weakness. When we insist that we can face challenges and obstacles by our own power, and not turning to God in prayer and worship for direction we have chosen the power of this world and not the way of God.

Weakness is God's way. We need only to look at our Gospel passage today to see that. In the latter half of our Gospel reading from Mark, we heard Jesus sending out the disciples two-by-two to extend his mission of proclamation and healing. He sends them out ordering them to take no staff, no bag, no bread, no money and only to bring one set of clothes. He sends them off woefully unprepared for the journey. Jesus sends out the disciples and they are weak, they are amateurs. "Peter has not yet declared 'You are the Messiah.' They haven't experienced the Lord's Supper, or the crucifixion or the witnessed the resurrection. They have not yet been anointed by the Holy Spirit." And yet Jesus sends them out anyways. He sends them out and gives them authority over unclean spirits, and a mission to proclaim his kingdom and to cure the sick. And that's what they do. They go forth, woefully unprepared, woefully underqualified for the mission Jesus set before them and lo and behold they were successful, casting out many demons and anointing with oil many who were sick, curing them. By their own power the disciples had no right to accomplish what they did, and if they had believed they could do it on their own they would have failed miserably. Instead they trusted Jesus, they trusted that in spite of all signs pointing to the failure of their journey, they trusted that in their weakness God's power would be perfected, and God's kingdom would be proclaimed.

Do we trust that God's kingdom will be proclaimed in our weakness? Are we ready to trust God, and not the power we display or the plans we make? Annie Dillard, an American author suggests that often we are not aware of the stakes we are playing with when she writes "On the whole, I do not find Christians...sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, making up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

If we truly believe that we worship and follow the living God, who created all the cosmos and all therein, and if we believe that we have been invited to participate in God's mission in the world then Dillard is right. We are like children playing with a chemistry set trying to make dynamite. We are involved in things well above our pay grade so to speak. God has invited the Church to be his agents of redemption and reconciliation in this world. He has invited us into the proclamation of his Kingdom to the ends of the world and he has invited us to live out the reconciliation and restoration of the whole world that he initiated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We should have no business in such a grand and far-reaching endeavour, we are so often unable to experience and live out reconciliation in our own lives, let alone share it with the world. We are so often unable to hear the Good News of God's Kingdom in our own lives, let alone proclaim it to others. But God calls us anyways, he invites us to join him in his great rescue of the whole world in spite of our weakness, in spite of our inadequacies. There is a quote that goes around social media from time to time, whose origins are hard to track down but it says "God does not call the qualified, but qualifies the called." The disciples were fisherman who had no business as teachers, preachers, healers and leaders. Paul was a Jewish zealot who persecuted the Church, and yet God called them anyways, God called them in their weakness and invited them to Trust that following him was enough, that through their weakness God's power would be made perfect.

If we come to know our weakness, if we come to know our unpreparedness we have two options: we can be struck by fear at the immense task before us or we can Trust that God is with us, we can Trust in the God who has called us and that in trusting him great and wondrous things will be done in his name. Each of us in our own walks with Jesus is sent out underprepared for the task ahead, Jesus invites each of us as disciples to go out just as the first disciples did, declaring the Kingdom of God in the world and doing the good works of the kingdom.

What are you afraid of in your life of faith? Do you feel unprepared for the difficult act of forgiving someone who has deeply offended you? Place your trust in God, step out into forgiveness even though it may hurt in the process. Do you feel unprepared for the challenging task of proclaiming your faith to someone you know, to sharing the Good News of Jesus with other people? Place your trust in God, proclaim God's Kingdom with the way you live and with the way you speak, with full knowledge you might be rejected. You'll notice in our Gospel reading that Jesus doesn't sugar coat anything for the disciples, he warns them that rejection will be expected, but even when the disciples are rejected, even when we are rejected when we proclaim the Kingdom of God by word of deed, the kingdom has still come near, even in our apparent failure God is at work, because the power of God is made perfect in weakness.

As we step out into the community as Grace Church. As we seek to serve the community through our ESL conversation classes, through our monthly dinners, through the weekday BBQs and whatever else we may do, we will be underprepared for the task ahead of us. No amount of planning or preparation will get us ready for the immense task of being a beacon of God's light to South Scarborough. Instead we must hear God's promise that he has given us authority to do his works and will here in this community, and step out. We must go out because the living God, is drawing us out to where we can never return, all we need for the journey is trust, for God will qualify us for our calling on the way. Amen