

**The House of Hope Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Andrew McDonald preaching**  
**“Power Made Perfect in Weakness”**  
**April 5, 2020**  
**Mark 14: 32-42, 2 Corinthians 12: 7—10**

**Palm Sunday**

We are coming toward the climax of the 40 days of Lent. Lent is a journey. It is an Image of heading toward some place. On the road. I think it is important to put the ancient stories and imaginatively place them creatively in our modern experience.

Being on the road, I think of our modern experience. Driving down the road. The traffic backed up. Then you realize why, up ahead, there is a large vehicle with a sign on the back, in bright yellow with black letters that simply says, “Wide Load.”

It is a simple, but vivid image. So much of what we carry with us is about a wide load. Is it us driving the wide load truck?! We are on a journey, but we have so much baggage. We want it all. Big homes. Big jobs. Big salaries. Big vacations.

So many belongings. But also we bring so much other baggage: so many past resentments, slights, hurts, and so much anger at the past. Add to that so many ideas that are, we are convinced, the only right ideas. In other words, we carry so much self-righteousness. We live in a wide load culture, and we are tempted to be part of the problem.

Paul is being confronted by a bunch of wide-load people in Corinth. They have learned it from the world around them. They brag about their credentials. Their clubs. Their social status. In essence, their colleges and degrees. Their religious scrupulousness. How they eat the right food, do the right practices. They give a veritable catalog of credentials.

Paul says: OK, I have a list of my own. You want a list of credentials? I’ll give you a big list. And then Paul goes on with his own list.

The number of his times in prison,  
The number of times he was beat up and flogged.  
The number of times he was given a death sentence, and survived.  
Given a death sentence, and survived.  
The multiple times he was shipwrecked.  
The days he floated adrift on the open sea.  
The number of times he was threatened by gangs of bandits.  
The number of times he was threatened by his own religious people,  
not to mention people from other religions whom he had offended.

The number of times he was hungry, and thirsty, and shivering and freezing in the cold. Paul's letter suggests an "et cetera" Meaning that the list could go on a lot longer.

Paul's credentials are not about his successes, but about his weaknesses, failures. The pain he has gone through. All that he has suffered. A catalog of weaknesses. His life is one long demonstration of weakness and failure. Who boasts, who brags about such things?

He goes on to say, despite his predicaments and his weakness, the gospel was powerfully present. Why? Because his message survived. Not only survived, but thrived. And it was not because of what Paul brought to the table. It was not Paul's strength, but God's. The only conclusion he can imagine is: this must be God's doing.

The key to understanding Paul is found when he quotes Jesus, saying, "My grace is sufficient; my power is made perfect in weakness."

God does not make bad things happen. God comes to the tragedies of life, and redeems them. The bad things in life are there. God cannot prevent them. Some of the bad things happen, because we have not prevented them. We are responsible beings.

An important function of hardships, as Paul understands them, is to help distinguish what is truly important in our lives. Ours is the God of the exodus. And God will provide a way out. It does not mean there will not be 40 years in the wilderness. But that God will see us through the wilderness.

That leads us to the cross. The scripture today is of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. He can read the signs. He knows what happens when you challenge the status quo, when you challenge the powers that be. He knows what is coming. It is a terrifying prospect of what lies on the horizon. Terror makes people suffer. Jesus is suffering. He is fearful and afraid. He does what any human being would do: he looks for a way out.

He sees that his so called friends and loyalists do not have the courage and conviction To stand with him. One has to wonder, if all of Jesus' friends and followers would have stood up for him, how differently this story would have ended. But the crowd that had welcomed him with palms, with just a few words and slogans from the powers that be, now cry to have him crucified.

Something the psychologist Jung said haunts me about the crowd. Jung wrote: "It is a fact that cannot be denied: The wickedness of others becomes our own wickedness, because it kindles something evil in our own hearts."The crowd turns quickly.

But it is not just the crowd. The disciples know what is coming. They do not join the crowd, but something evil is kindled in them. The evil of sitting on your hands. Napping through the build-up to disaster. Running away from the truth. Denying their Lord. Sleeping disciples feed the fire of the dynamics of evil in the world. Jesus knows about sleeping disciples

Jesus prays to God, "Let this cup pass from me." Is there any other way? In his prayer, he comes to realize, there is no way out that would not be a denial of God, and that he will not do. Above all else, Jesus trusts in God.

There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. God will be with us and for us. That does not mean we do not have to go through times of trial. The cross. Suffering. Even death. Which is what looms on the horizon.

So the story is of the faithfulness of Jesus, But also of the sleepiness of the disciples. They did not have to be that way. They would have had to take a risk, to be willing to suffer. The story could have changed.

So the question becomes: What about us? We have our crosses to bear. Our lonesome valley to walk. Our challenges may not be what Jesus faced.

But times of suffering may constitute an opportune time “to look more carefully at the wide load” we carry, And to ask, are we who God has empowered us to be? It is a time to take stock of ourselves and of the social world we have helped create. To be more discriminating and to ask anew what the goal is. Is it what God is calling for? To ask new about the shape of our public life together: Is it what God is showing us it ought to be? To make sure that our faith guides us as we more clearly in our life together.

Jesus in the garden, looking to God, shows us that the situations of suffering in life may be a test. To see if we have the strength, the faithfulness, the courage to do what God is calling us to do. Jesus knows what is going on in his world, and he does what is right anyway. In the midst of the fearfulness of it all, he goes to God in prayer. Which is to say, he makes it clear that this time of suffering is a holy time. A time of examining ourselves, growing closer to God.

A time to decide to reject the wide load life. To go the narrow path that will give our life some sort of meaning, some eternal meaning. Jesus gives us a different path for our journey. The path that is faithful: willing to suffer in the right way, at the right time for the right thing. In a fainthearted world, that carries the wide load baggage of meaninglessness, Jesus gives a different path. To seize the day. To not escape responsibility, but to grasp it fully, and embrace it. To show resolve. To let light shine out of darkness. When necessary, to be willing to sacrifice in faithfulness and love.

Because God is with us on this journey. As Paul says, (in 2 Corinthians) we are “afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in our body the death of Jesus, So that the life of Jesus May be manifested in our own bodies.”

The heart of the gospel does not lead to an easy life. It is not the absence of conflict. Rather it is an affable divine assurance. Jesus in the garden: is an image of the faithful seeking God’s guidance, seeking God’s presence. Not to avoid the conflicts of life, not to go around the problems, but to trust in God in the midst of them.

The larger story of Jesus: that God does not forget the one who has the nail holes in his hands, who has his side slashed open from the soldier’s spear. God’s power is made perfect in weakness.

I’d like to tell you the story of a couple of people I knew a few years ago. Ms. Whitaker and her

daughter. Ms. Whitaker was a class act, beautiful, lots of style, lots of grace, very smart. She had her own business, it was very successful.

Then in a tragic accident, her daughter went blind. She woke up in the hospital afterward, she asked her mother, “Will I ever see again?” Ms. Whitaker took a breath, and told her, “No, you will not, with your eyes. But I will be your eyes. And with God’s help, we will find a way.”

And so they began the journey. Ms. Whitaker had to step out of her social life. She had to reconfigure her business life. And when her daughter wanted to go to college, Ms. Whitaker went to classes with her. And when they did not have books on tape, Ms. Whitaker dictated the books so her daughter could listen to them. How many books... all four years. And when it came time for graduation, her daughter had a perfect 4.0.

Theirs is a story that is not a tribute to the power of the body. The body is weak. It is fallible. Bodies fail. Theirs is not a tribute to the power of the mind, though there were two fine minds. Theirs is a tribute to the power of love, The love that manifested itself in weakness: On the part of two people. The weakness of mother’s ego, to give up so much so that someone else could thrive. The weakness of the daughter’s spirit, as she was willing to admit she needed help, and received it. God’s power is made perfect in weakness.

We all have a journey to take. We have to make sure that nothing gets in the way of our journey through God’s love. Our call is not to pretend we are perfect. None of us are. Our call is not to pretend we have no weaknesses. We all have them.

Our call is to face the world, and when suffering love is required, to do everything we can to be faithful. Even if everything is taken away. We trust: God’s power is made perfect in weakness. We see that power on the cross of Jesus Christ, who suffered and died for us all. Amen.

Sources:

Miroslav Volf. “Against the Tide: Love in a Time of Petty Dreams and Persisting Enmities.” Eerdmans Press.

Gene Outka. “Respite for Hallowing.” Reflection, vol. 75; no 2.