

“Strength in the Struggle”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
January 15, 2017

**1 Corinthians 1: 1-9**

So, it's been an interesting week around the office here at church. Both Lisa and I took a sick day on Monday, and when we came to the office on Tuesday, neither one of us could talk very well. Lisa has been battling a bad cold/infection for several days, and she lost her voice on Monday and Tuesday. She's on medications and seems to be getting better, which we are grateful for.

I had a small cyst removed from my tongue on Monday. It was where I'd bitten down on my tongue a few times, and it developed some scar tissue as a result. It took all of 10 minutes for the oral surgeon to remove, but I've been struggling to speak and eat ever since. I apologize if I'm not as clear in my speaking today, as I can attest that having stitches in your tongue is not the most comfortable experience in the world.

For me, part of that has been not realizing how much I actually use my tongue. I didn't realize how much I rely on my tongue to pronounce certain words or letters. I didn't realize how sneezing can be particularly painful if your tongue is injured! I didn't realize how much my tongue is used for eating, especially how much I use it to pry food out of my teeth when I've eaten something. Honestly, it's something I've taken for granted for most of my life, but this experience has helped me better appreciate how important something as mundane as the tongue can be.

I'm sure all of us can identify with that feeling. Maybe you've been sick like Lisa has been this week, and you've lost your voice. You recognize very quickly how much you rely on the ability to communicate in that way. The most basic of tasks – talking on the telephone, ordering food in a restaurant, asking for help – now comes with new levels of difficulty and complexity. For some, this condition might become permanent due to injury or illness, and they are forced to struggle the rest of their lives with this impediment. While the world is free to communicate in speech, they might feel trapped or isolated by their inability to talk.

Or maybe you've had an injury that's limited your mobility. You are on crutches due to a broken leg, or you are in a wheelchair after major surgery. You find that you are not as independent as you once were or wish you could be. You are reliant on others to open doors for you, or to transport you places, or to help you get dressed. The most basic of tasks become more complex and difficult. For some, this

condition might become permanent, as an injury doesn't heal, or disease takes away their physical strength. It becomes more and more apparent that there will not be a returning to normal; there is a new normal that they must try to adjust to. While the world is free to come and go as it pleases, these folks feel weak and impotent by their inability to physically move.

It might be physical impediments that cause us significant struggles in life. It might be emotional challenges that cause us paralyzing struggles in life. And all of these might cause us to wrestle and struggle mightily with our faith in life. We might wonder why God would allow such illness or injury to affect us or our loved ones. We might question God's purpose for our life, or wonder whether we are doing everything "right" to please God.

The struggles are real. The doubt can be powerful. How we respond to those struggles reflects deeply on our trust in God and our faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. For it can be in those moments of struggle that our faith actually deepens when we trust, as Paul writes, that Christ "will strengthen us to the end" (1:8).

Our scripture lesson today is from 1 Corinthians, and the struggle that the Corinthian church was dealing with was division. The Corinthian church was a diverse group, and subsequently had much difficulty reaching a consensus on basic issues. There were also many who thought highly of themselves, who believed they possessed special spiritual knowledge and wisdom, and instructed the church in ways contrary to how Paul had instructed them according to the gospel.

That is why, right from the beginning, Paul seeks to reestablish his authority before this church. "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God . . ." The words which follow are not coming from just anyone; they are spoken by one who has known the Corinthians from the start, and he will use that authority with grace to tell the church what it needs to hear in the midst of its struggles.

And to address those struggles, Paul begins this important letter in a spirit of thanksgiving. "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus." Paul reminds the Corinthians that despite their differences, they first were created by a loving God through his grace, and he is thankful for their fellowship, and indirectly, so should they be thankful - "for in Christ you have been enriched in every way."

Paul stresses that the Corinthians' insistence on their own gifts as signs that they are better than others is way off-base. He says, "You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ." God has blessed them - all of them - with the gifts they need, and those gifts are meant for one thing: "to be called into the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ." Those gifts are not intended to

be used to lift us up as individuals in Christ – but to build up the Body of Christ – “the fellowship of God’s Son.”

How does this relate to our situation today? Too often in the church and our world, we are quick to judge those who are different, quick to label someone who disagrees with our point of view. Those judgments and labels lead to divisions and acrimony, conditions that think first of the few or the one, rather than the good of the whole.

As one commentator notes, “Paul’s relationship to other believers and his thankfulness to God for them is based not on whether he likes them or on whether they view issues in the world in the same way, but on the simple and profound fact that God’s grace is active in them and in him. Our modern Christian community is founded on God’s grace given to all, not on whether we are socially compatible and not on whether we take the same political views. Our lives in Christ are never just our own but always also involve how we are relating to those around us. Our life in Christ is not manifested simply by a change in attitude but must also make a difference in the choices and decisions we make, the actions we take, and the way we treat not only ourselves but also others” (J. Paul Sampley, New Interpreter’s Bible, Abingdon Press, Nashville, © 2002: 799-800).

Consider for a moment a time in your life when you were struggling – I mean, really struggling. You were consumed by doubt, unsure about what the future would bring. You didn’t know if you had what it took anymore to do your job, or whether what you did still made a difference. In those times of personal struggle, it can be very isolating and challenging, to say the least.

Now imagine hearing these words in that time of struggle: “I give thanks to my God always for you; in every way you have been enriched in God, in speech and knowledge of every kind; you are not lacking in any spiritual gift; Christ will strengthen you to the end; God is faithful.”

How would that sound to you? It would be encouraging. It would be hope-filled. It would make you feel valued and loved. It would remind you that despite your struggles, God is faithful. It would remind you that despite your inadequacies, you have been blessed by God with everything you need to fulfill God’s purpose in your life. It would give you strength in the midst of your struggle, and recall the faith that Paul professes: we are all called by faith into the fellowship of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1:9).

I can say that personally, when I have gone through such struggles, I have been lifted up by God’s grace through similar words of encouragement. When someone writes me a note or an email of thanks, it has often come in a time in my life when I was struggling and unsure. Perhaps that is why I will always read Paul’s letters as just that – letters to believers, words of encouragement and instruction and hope. And perhaps, even though I don’t do it nearly as often as I should, I seek to

speak similar words of gratitude and affirmation to others, trusting that the Spirit is moving in, around, and through me and them.

In our Winter Seminar Series class yesterday, we talked about the book “Being Disciples” by Rowan Williams. In a chapter about holiness, he writes:

*Holy people, those who are saints rather than saintly, actually make you feel better than you are . . . The holy person somehow enlarges your world, makes you feel more yourself, opens you up, affirms you . . . These people have made me feel better rather than worse about myself. Or rather, not quite that: these are never people who make me feel complacent about myself, far from it; they make me feel that there is hope for my confused and compromised humanity . . . A holy person makes you see things in yourself and around you that you had not seen before; that is to say, enlarges the world rather than shrinking it. That is why we say of Jesus that he is the “most Holy One,” because he above all changes the landscape, casts a new light on everything* (Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life*, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, © 2016: 51-53).

God works in you and me and others to give strength amidst our struggles. We are all holy in one form or another - to lift up the downtrodden, to strengthen the weak, to guide the lost, to comfort the distressed. We have been blessed by others’ holiness in our lives. Will we acknowledge that God is working through us to enlarge others’ worlds and share that strength with others?

Christ is in us – as individuals, as the church, as a witness to the world. May we seek to live everyday lives of thankfulness for God’s grace, so that our world might be transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God. Amen.