

WGUMC June 28, 2015
"The Power of God and Our Weakness"
2 Sam 5:1-5, 9-10; 2 Cor 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-6

The horrible shooting at the church in Charleston shocked the conscious of our nation. And it is looking likely that nine dead African Americans will succeed in doing what countless civil rights and faith-based organizations have been trying and failing for decades to do: remove the Confederate flag from the grounds of the South Carolina statehouse. I guess it's true what Paul says in our reading today: when you are weak, then you are strong.

This act of domestic terrorism raises up questions for us: what is power and what is weakness? Did Dylaan Roof have power because he had hate in his heart and a gun in his hand? Were the church members weak because they didn't? Depends on your perspective, doesn't it? So today we're going to look at power and weakness from God's perspective.

The lectionary gives us another story about David. Two weeks ago, we had the story of David and Goliath. For David, it was the beginning of a very successful military career. By the time we get to this week's reading, David has been fighting and winning for a long time. So after old Saul and his sons get killed, David is made King, first over Judah and then over all of Israel.

When he captures the city of Jerusalem, the last Canaanite stronghold in the region, David makes it the capitol of his united kingdom. He builds a wall around it and calls it "the city of David." And our story concludes with these words: "And David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him."

But for David, the danger became greater and greater, too. As King he had a lot of political power, which means he had lots of opportunities to abuse it. And he did. As you know, he committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her

husband, Uriah. But there's more. David ignored the rape of his daughter by one of his sons and then was driven from Jerusalem by a vengeful brother. That son battled his father for the throne and got killed. But this was not a victory that David wanted to celebrate. Instead, he went back to the palace to grieve. That's what having too much political power can do to you. Just ask Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, Leland Yee... I could go on. The list is so long.

But it's too easy to point fingers at the politically powerful when the spiritually powerful have their problems, too. In 2 Corinthians the Apostle Paul is boasting about his spiritual power. He's had these amazing visions. It's awfully tempting for him to think that he must be a pretty amazing guy. And that's all it takes for spiritual power to become a weakness.

To keep Paul from being too impressed with himself, Satan (acting as God's secret agent) sends Paul a thorn in the

flesh to take him down a peg. Now we don't know what the thorn is. We don't know the nature of his torment. But Paul knows. And even if Paul understands the purpose of this thorn, he is none too happy about it and prays to God three times to remove it.

But God does not remove it, because God's answer to Paul's prayer goes like this: Paul, that thorn is going to teach you that my grace is sufficient for you. MY power is all you need. And unless you give up clinging to your own power, unless you become weak in the eyes of the world, my power cannot be made perfect in you.

You might say that God sent Pope Francis into the world to be a thorn in the flesh for politicians and princes of the church. He certainly called out the politically and economically powerful in his recent encyclical on the environment. But ever since he took office, he has been going after the spiritually powerful, too. Last year, he forced the resignation of the

Bishop of Bling who spent \$43 million on renovations to the Bishop's palace in Limburg, Germany. This year he's been trying to clean up the corruption in the Roman curia. And for the first time, an Archbishop will stand trial at the Vatican for criminal child sexual abuse. Francis seems to understand that the Church must deal with this thorn in the flesh, must expose the Church's weakness if its power is ever to be made more perfect. Francis would tell us that in this, as in all of our struggles, God's grace is sufficient.

Heaven knows we have struggles. And we, too, have thorns. What do they look like for us? What is the power in our life that we have no control over? It could be an addiction to cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, sex, food, shopping, or the internet. It could be a bad habit like negative thinking, complaining, gossiping, meddling. It could be one of the demons of pride, greed, jealousy, anger, or resentment. It could be something in our past or a person we have to deal with in the present or a

problem that is coming at us from the future. Whatever it is, it manages to torment us no matter what we do.

And it is such an incredible waste of time. Think of all the things God is not doing in us because we are consumed with this thorn in our flesh, because we give our time and our energy, our health and our wealth to this thing that is either going to kill us or teach us to pray. And so we have to pray every day: "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

That's what Paul was praying. He wanted deliverance from this evil in his life. If he could have defeated it on his own, he wouldn't have been praying about it. But he did pray and kept praying. And, ironically, the more he admitted his weakness to God, the more power he had. "Whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Admitting our powerlessness is the beginning of grace. Acknowledging our utter dependence on God is the first step in

experiencing God's power in our lives. After all, power is never really ours; it all belongs to God. [Psalm 62:11] It was God's power working in Paul that made him strong. If we want to experience that same power, we have to allow ourselves to experience God. And this is where Jesus comes in.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus has been doing all kinds of deeds of power. But then he goes home and begins to teach in his hometown synagogue. The folks there remember him as a carpenter. They don't know him as the Christ. And they can't really believe what they are hearing about him. So the Bible says, Jesus "could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief."

The question I have is not why Jesus had no power in Nazareth, but what was keeping the Nazarenes from experiencing it? You can just imagine. The people thought they knew Jesus. They thought they had the right to define him, to

own him. Then his power would be their power. But what Jesus and Paul and Francis would tell us is that we can't own power. Power belongs to God. We can only be a channel for it. We can only experience it as it flows through us. And until we are ready to give up our illusion of being in control, until we are willing to admit our weakness and let go, there is no power flow.

Preachers learn this the hard way. Once in a while, I will come to the pulpit with what I think is one of my most mediocre sermons, one that bored me even as I was writing it. And then something happens when I preach it. Somehow, in spite of all my failings, all my weaknesses, the Word moves with power through it. Afterward I'll be thinking, "Whoa. I didn't do that. God did that. And for some reason I had the good sense to get out of the way."

God's power flows through you when you get out of the way. Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston has always known this. This church has long used its weakness

to show the world God's power. Back in 1816, the white Methodists of Charleston wanted to build a carriage house on the graves of black Methodists. So the blacks started their own church even though the members were harassed and sometimes arrested. When one of their leaders was executed for plotting a slave rebellion, the church was burned down. In 1834, all black churches were outlawed and the congregation worshipped underground. When the Civil War was over, they rebuilt their church, but it got destroyed again by an earthquake in 1886. They replaced it in 1891 and that building is still standing.

Through it all, the people of Mother Emanuel have been a beacon in the fight for civil rights. Booker T. Washington spoke there. Martin Luther King preached there. Coretta Scott King marched there. When Dylaan Roof showed up at their Bible Study eleven days ago, he didn't come just to kill black folk, he came to kill their faith and destroy their legacy. But he couldn't

comprehend what these descendants of slaves all understand, that when you are weak, then you are strong. When you have faith and give your life for the sake of the Gospel, Christ can and will do deeds of great power through you. My friends, pray for our Methodist brothers and sisters in Charleston. Like them, keep the faith. And don't ever be afraid to embrace your weakness, because when you do, the world will see God's power flowing through you. To quote our President this past week: Amazing Grace.