



Independence Day

July 4, 2021 - Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord: May your Word only be spoken, and may your Word only be heard; in the Name of Jesus Christ, the living Word. Amen.

On this day 245 years ago, a ragtag band of colonists dared to speak for all colonists in resolving to break away from the reign of despotic King George the III. On this day, the Declaration of Independence was approved by the Second Continental Congress. Perhaps the most famous phrase from Declaration of Independence is this:

“All men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” So wrote Thomas Jefferson.

The power of these words for stoking a fire for eventual justice for all people, not just white, property-owning men, is undeniable. So is the power of these words for justifying unmitigated greed and prejudice. The Apostle Paul wrote something a bit different to the church in Corinth, which we heard this morning: “I will boast of my weaknesses, for whenever I am weak, I am strong.” Just as the words of the Declaration of Independence have inspired countless people around the world, so have the power and truth of these words of Paul encouraged innumerable souls through dark and fearsome times.

During this season in our secular calendar, when we celebrate the importance of independence, and at a time in our national life when the political and culture wars emphasize *separation* and *dominance*, on this day in the church of Jesus Christ, we hear our brother Paul extol the power of *connection* and *vulnerability*.

Paul finds himself in a tiff with his congregation in Corinth, a church that he started in the year 50 or so. Over the past few weeks, we have been hearing segments from the Second Letter to the Corinthians. Paul composed this letter while in the city of Ephesus, on the occasion of a challenge to his leadership from some other authorities who have gained power in Paul’s absence.

In a complicated rhetorical strategy, Paul here tries to defend his spiritual authority by describing his dependence on Christ, especially in the face of the thorn in the flesh that he refers to. The Greek word translated as “thorn” can also be translated into the English word “stake,” like the kind of stake you would sharpen for a booby trap in a pit, or place on the ramparts of a fort to impale invaders. Throughout the centuries people have tried to guess what the thorn or stake is—perhaps some physical ailment, perhaps those who seek to undermine his authority, perhaps depression—no one really knows. What matters is that it drove Paul to acknowledge his utter dependence on Christ. Not that Paul hasn’t acknowledged that dependence already. We’ve heard the catalogue of hardships in his letter to the Corinthians these past few weeks. And yet in all of these trials, he finds that God has given him what he needs to continue to do the work that God has given him to do: namely, to proclaim of the Good News of the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.



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Paul *lives* the conundrum that he experiences God's power most greatly when he is in the place of greatest vulnerability. He invites *us* into the paradox that Christ's power is made perfect in weakness.

One of the great reliefs of coming out of the pandemic is that we are able to welcome our AA groups back into the building for in-person meetings. Many of you may know that in the 12 Step Tradition, recovery of sanity and serenity begins with the First Step: to admit powerlessness over whatever the addictive behavior may be, and that life has become unmanageable. Upon this simple but profound confession, healing is based. It is the gateway to a life that is open to one's Higher Power, open to help and to healing. Because the illusion of control and of independence is squarely faced, the possibility of receiving aid and strength for change starts to become a reality.

In fact, it is not too hard to see how *every* facet of our lives is dependent on someone or something else, whether we accept that fact or not. I found this in a blog the other day that called for an *Interdependence* Day.

"Independence is overrated, and more than that, it is a myth. We are all utterly *interdependent* beings from birth to death. We could not survive without microbes that help build our soil and the plants and trees that create oxygen and offer us food; we would never become mature adults without teachers and mentors; our cities would be full of disease if we didn't have people who collect our garbage. More than Independence Day, we need an *Interdependence* Day to celebrate our dependence upon one another and the earth, and our ultimate dependence upon God." <https://englewoodreview.org/july-4-celebrating-interdependence-day-vol-2-25/>

In addition to cataloguing his woes and dependence on Christ, throughout all his letters, Paul acknowledges his deep connections to other people. He is profoundly attached to the people in all his congregations, upon whom he is dependent for food and shelter, either directly or indirectly. He sees this dependence as an expression of God's provision for him. In the same vein, in the Gospel this morning, we hear Jesus commanding his disciples to depend on the hospitality of the communities they will visit.

Recognizing our dependence, our insufficiency, leads to recognizing our interdependence, which can lead us to places of great strength where God's power is manifest.

Now, this recognizing this kind of weakness is different than being habitually lazy, or sloppy, or unprepared. I think of the non-violent civil disobedience campaigns most clearly associated in my mind with the Civil Rights movement in the American South. Success depended on the disciplined vulnerability of ordinary people willing to be attacked by dogs, firehoses, and police batons; and on the conscience of Americans watching those confrontations on national television. Laws were passed; some hearts were changed. When we are weak, we are strong.



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Or, I think of my mother, may she rest in peace. When she was a new Christian, baptized into an evangelical Christian tradition as an adult, I came home from college with my most snarky Pat Robertson and Jimmy Swaggart imitations ready to unload, which I did. And rather than get defensive and combative, she cried. She told me how much meeting Jesus meant to her, and how he was helping her live with joy and gratitude (and, I daresay, helping her to live with a snarky son.) Her vulnerability was powerful—it eventually helped lead me to Christ.

Or, I think of Paralympic athletes. As you know, we are in the season of pre-Olympic fervor. The other day I saw a TV spot about an athlete named Hunter Woodhall. He was a double amputee before he was a year old. He was the first double amputee to receive a full, Division 1 athletic scholarship, to the University of Arkansas track and field team, where he competed alongside “able-bodied runners,” even winning a bronze medal as part of the 4 x 400 meter relay team at the SEC championships. In 2016 in Rio de Janeiro, he medaled in the 200 and 400 meter races. He will run in Tokyo this summer as part of the US Paralympic team. Such a powerful body, and his spirit even more so. The weakness of his body yields to extraordinary strength. What an inspiration for people everywhere.

When I seem weak, I am strong.

As we accept our weaknesses and limitations, we are in a position to acknowledge the dependence that already exists. We are in a position to be teachable, to learn, and to grow. We are in a position to receive the strength, courage, hope, and love that we need from God to carry on loving God and our neighbor as Jesus teaches.

As the great Canadian singer song-writer Leonard Cohen put it:

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in;

The cracks are where the light gets in. (*Anthem*, 1992)

The cracks are where Jesus gets in.

Amen.