Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 5, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Theme: Pentecost People: Healing: Brokenness & Wholeness

[prayer]

Pentecost People are not pollyannish. We are going on to perfection, but we know the world is nowhere close to perfect. With the coming of the Holy Spirit also comes the Spirit's demands to see the world through Her eyes. Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, famously prayed, "Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God." We are daily confronted with the world's brokenness: broken minds, bodies, and spirits; broken families and relationships; broken systems; broken nations; a broken Creation. We can theologize about where this brokenness comes from, about the nature of personal and systemic sin, about why evil exists, why bad things happen to good people while the unjust and unrighteous go unpunished.

But too often we engage in that activity so we can assign blame rather than taking responsibility for the work of healing our world. Not the whole world, but the places and relationships and communities that God has entrusted to each one of us. Remember that the root meaning of salvation is healing. Jesus came to heal what is broken in the first creation and inaugurate a New Creation. The vision of a healed and whole New Creation is where we began this series. It is also where we will end.

Paul understood well just how broken and risky the world is. Over the course of his ministry, he was beset by innumerable hardships – poverty, beatings, imprisonment, hunger (2 Cor 6:4-5). He faced conflict within the Christian community and persecution from without. He knew what it felt like to disagree passionately with people you love and care about, to struggle for unity and inclusion against the forces of division and exclusion. As he wrote his second letter to the Corinthians, he faced the possibility of permanent estrangement from the

Corinthian church, a community he had loved and nurtured with his own sweat and tears.

When we are tired from fighting, when our spirits are battered and bruised by the work of loving our neighbors and our enemies as ourselves, it can be tempting to pull up the drawbridges of our hearts and barricade ourselves inside. But the words of Paul entreat us not to give into that temptation. He tells us to keep our hearts open: Open to sorrow and rejoicing. Open to need and abundance. Open to weakness as well as strength. Because when we open our hearts to our weakness, we also open them to the strength of God.

In our Scripture lesson Paul writes about himself in the third person, describing how he was swept up in a vision of Paradise. In Paul's culture, heavenly journeys were often used to validate a spiritual leader's calling. Paul was contending with people who were using visions and mystical experiences to claim authority over the Corinthians. Paul mockingly calls these people "super-apostles." These pretend apostles were telling the Corinthians behind Paul's back that Paul was not worth listening to, that they were more qualified to lead because of their prophetic powers and journeys into the spiritual realm. They were telling the Corinthians that Paul lacked true spiritual insight – even though Paul brought the Gospel to the Corinthians first.

We can imagine how it must have stung for the church in Corinth to reject Paul's leadership in favor of these super-apostles. Paul had refrained from sharing his own spiritual vision with the Corinthians because he was always clear with them that the proof of his authority was not any special skill or power but instead the fruit of his dedicated ministry among them.

What gives us spiritual authority as followers of Jesus? What makes for an authentic Christian witness? To his detractors Paul says, "If mystical experiences give one power and authority, then I am more than qualified, and my vision is the proof. But mysticism does not matter. What matters is humility."

Paul refuses to use his own extraordinary vision to make the case for his authority. Instead, he chooses to let his actions speak for themselves. He tells the Corinthians that he was given a "thorn in [his] body" to keep him humble (v. 7 CEB). We do not know what this thorn was. It could have been something

physical, like a disability or a chronic illness. It could have been psychological, like recurring bouts of depression. Perhaps it was spiritual – a temptation Paul could not overcome, or a nagging doubt or fear. Perhaps this thorn was another person!

Because Paul does not elaborate, we can assume the Corinthians knew what his thorn was and how Paul struggled against it. His struggle was part of his witness to the authenticity of his faith. And the lack of detail makes space for us to insert our own thorns in the flesh. This is anything you struggle with, anything that makes you fall short of your own ideals. This thorn can be a teaching tool if you let it. Because when you are hurting, when you are weak, when you need something that you can't supply for yourself – that is the moment when you learn how to humble yourself, ask for help, and rely on God and others for what you need.

Like the story of Job, whose faith was tested by Satan, Paul saw his thorn as a test of his commitment to the mission God had given him. Most English translations use the word "thorn" to describe Paul's weakness, but a better word is "stake" – a "stake in the flesh." This stake was a sharpened piece of wood that was used to impale an enemy. Paul interprets this stake as a means of torture prepared by Satan to prevent him from spreading the Gospel.

But Paul also believes that God works in all things for the good of those who love Him (Rom 8:28). Three times Paul asks God to remove the stake in his body, but God does not. Instead, God *redeems* the stake to help give Paul perspective. And the perspective that God gives him is this: "My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9).

This is the great paradox of our Christian witness: When we imitate the vulnerable love of Jesus, the Holy Spirit works through our vulnerability and transforms it into the power of God. This truth is fundamental to the Gospel. But despite the freedom we can find in this truth, we continue to seek power in all the wrong ways. Our culture worships power. We believe that might is right. We laud classically strong, even aggressive, leaders. We speak of weakness as a moral failure. We reject the sufficiency of God's grace every time we try to secure our existence in this world with our own strength and influence. This happened in the ancient church, just a couple hundred years after Paul wrote this letter, when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire. It happened again in the Middle Ages, when the Church sought to be the supreme

world power. And again, in the modern period, as we capitulated to the forces of fascism and totalitarianism. And today, as Christian nationalism gains a foothold in our country, Christians are falling prey to the lie that political power will pave the way to God's kingdom. The deepest divisions in Christ's body are rooted in our misunderstanding of spiritual authority and power.

But Scripture teaches us that weakness and vulnerability are opportunities for the power and glory of God to shine. And God's power is nothing less than the good news of the Gospel. Though we are weakened by sin, God's grace, freely given, heals and strengthens us. Sin abounds, but God's grace abounds even more (Rom 5:20). When we open our hearts to the weakness and vulnerability of our humanity, we make a way for grace to become manifest in the world.

Paul declares, "I'll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses so that Christ's power can rest on me. I'm all right with weaknesses, insults, disasters, harassments, and stressful situations *for the sake of Christ*, because when I'm weak, then I'm strong" (vv. 9-10).

Paul chooses to boast not in his strength and qualifications, but in his humble humanity "so that the power of Christ may pitch a tent on me" (12:9b, trans. by B.J. Oropeza). This is the literal translation of the Greek. It is an allusion to the Tabernacle – the tent in the wilderness where the glory and power of God could come to rest among the Israelites.

Imagine your weakness, your imperfect humanity as a tent where the glory of God resides. When we acknowledge our weakness and humbly open our hearts to God, we allow the power of Christ to take up residence inside us. We become a living example of the Gospel. Our lives become a means of grace for other people by testifying to the process of being conformed to the image of Christ. Jesus suffered the ultimate helplessness at his crucifixion. Scourged and nailed to a tree, the people walking by challenged him to "Save yourself! If you are God's Son, come down from that cross" (Matt 27:40). This would have been a fine display of divine power. Instead, Jesus hung on that cross until he died…so that God's power could be fulfilled by raising him from the dead. The cross is the central symbol of our faith because it demonstrates that power resides with God, not with human beings. Christ was crucified in weakness but raised in power. The cross stands

empty as proof of God's grace. And the same victory belongs to each of us when we allow God's power to be perfected in our weakness.

The Greek word for "perfect" in this passage means "to reach full maturity." We mature in faith as we recognize our weaknesses and limitations, as we learn to rely deeply on the power of Christ dwelling in us, so God's grace can then be visible in our lives. This means saying goodbye to the world's definitions of power and embracing God's definition: Power in sacrifice and suffering. Power in compassion and empathy. Power in humility and contrition. Power in forgiveness and love. The world tells us these things are not virtues, they are weaknesses. But the Gospel tells us otherwise. And the Spirit pleads with us to open our hearts to them, to let these virtues transform our imperfections and mature us as followers of Jesus.

The stake in Paul's body gave him a spiritual perspective greater than his heavenly journey. And that perspective was the power of humility. Paul's witness to the Corinthians was not based on his own sufficiency. Instead, he became a vessel for the power and wisdom of God. "For God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25).

The true witness of a Christian is not dramatic testimony, prophecy, visions, or even spiritual knowledge. Nor is it wielding worldly power to accomplish heavenly goals. Our true witness, our greatest testimony, is Christ dwelling in us – opening our hearts to the power of God manifest in our weakness, operating through our imperfect humanity, transforming it as grace for the world, grace that will heal, save, and bring about a New Creation.

Amen.