

What are Our Strengths as a Church?

Colossians 3:12-17

As we examine our church and move toward a Grace Proclamation, today we consider “What are Our Strengths as a Church?”

Organizational and church consultants have been urging of late how important it is to invest in our strengths—make our strengths stronger—and not preoccupy ourselves with shoring up our weaknesses. Our strengths have to do with what Grace can best offer the world.

Every church has its own unique set of strengths, strengths God has loaned to us. What are ours?

Another way to ask the question is “What are our strengths that are usable by God?” or, “What are the strengths that God wants us to have?” I think our truest strengths are not always what we’re proud about but what we are thankful for. Pride can trip us up.

I

Implicit in the last two questions is the question: Who defines what are strengths and what are weaknesses? I think God’s ideas on the matter are different than the world’s.

There is a story in Judges I call “The Incredible Shrinking Army.” *Judges* is a book I neglect on purpose because it is all about the Hebrew people’s conquest of Canaan. Conquest in the name of God has been pretty ruinous in our human history. So I search for possible spiritual meanings in its pages that go deeper than military conquest.

Gideon is facing an enormous army assembled by the Midianites, numbering about 120,000. Gideon’s army is 32,000, so they are already outnumbered 4 to 1. God tells Gideon: Your army is too big. If you win people will attribute the victory to their own strength and not to me. So send 22,000 home.

Now his army as 10,000 troops. But God says it is still too big. By the time for the battle God has whittled down the army to 300! What are the odds Las Vegas would put on their victory? 10,000 to 1? But they won—like little David defeating Goliath.

I tell the story to suggest that some of what the world considers strength, God does not. And what the world considers weakness may be our “superpower” as a church. With that in mind let’s proceed.

II

In our text from Colossians Paul is using one of his favorite metaphors for the Christian life: clothes! When we become followers of Jesus we take off our old

set of clothes and put on a new set, the clothes of the kingdom of God. The same goes for the wardrobe of the church he says. As God's beloved, he says, put on these clothes:

compassion

kindness

lowliness

meekness

and patience

Slip on "forbearance" too. Out of love we "bear with" one another in difficult moments. Forbearance is an overlooked biblical virtue.

And forgiveness too. Forgiving others as God has forgiven us. These are *God's* clothes we wear, and God helps us with them on.

But above all, Paul says, put on love. That's what binds us together in perfect harmony.

And there's peace too. "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." Rule. We sure let other things rule our hearts. Put those old clothes away. Let Christ's peace rule your hearts.

Then Paul describes the church when it is in full swing, at its truest and best

-let the word of Christ dwell in you richly

-teach one another

-sing, sing, sing with thankfulness in your hearts to God

And the last:

-Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God.

These are the super-powers of the church. And they all spring from love.

That's the heart of Paul's prayer for the church we read together as our Call to Gathering: that we might know love, all the breadth and length, height and depth of it, and let that love fill our hearts (Ephesians 3:14-19).

III

Sometimes what the world calls strength is not our kind of strength. And what the world calls weakness is not weakness at all.

Today in super hero comics and gaming people are given a "super-power". But I think that applies in our lives. A superpower is something we have, sometimes hidden, that we have to help the world. What is yours? What's the church's?

Greta Thunberg, the extraordinary teenager who has led a movement for environmental responsibility and has stood up to governments and their leaders

has said that her Asperger's and being on the autism spectrum is her superpower. It has given her extraordinary focus and the courage to challenge the leaders of the world without fear. Sometimes, she says, what makes us different is our super-power!

So, what are our strengths at Grace? What is our superpower? What are our strengths that God can use for God's purposes? What are the strengths God wants for us?