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Pentecost VII
July 7, 2024
Text: II Corinthians 12:1 – 10
Title: Is Something Missing?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. When I was a kid in school, I used to love it when one of my teachers would read to us from Shel Silverstein's book called *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. For those of you who aren't familiar with it, this book is a collection of poems that are directed towards a younger audience to help get them into poetry, and some of them were so good that I can still remember having them read to me when I was a kid in grade school, especially the one about a kid who loved peanut butter sandwiches. It wasn't until I was older and studying to become a teacher that I realized that there were several other books written by Mr. Silverstein that weren't necessarily poems, but showed off his writing talents just as well. One of them is called *The Missing Piece*, and it's one of those classic stories with a lesson to be learned.

In *The Missing Piece*, Shel Silverstein tells the story of a circle that is missing a large triangular wedge much like a piece cut out of a pie. More than anything the circle wanted to be whole with nothing missing, so it went around looking for its missing piece. But because it was incomplete it could only roll around very slowly. So it admired the flowers along the way. Then it chatted with the worms, and enjoyed the sunshine. It found lots of different pieces, but none of them quite fit. So it left them all by the side of the road and kept on searching.

Then one day the circle found a piece that fit perfectly. It was so happy. Now it could be whole, with nothing missing. It incorporated the missing piece into itself and began to roll again. Now that it was a perfect circle, it could roll very fast, too fast, in fact, to notice the flowers or talk to the worms. When the circle realized how different the world seemed when it rolled so

quickly, it stopped, left its piece by the side of the road, and rolled slowly away. The circle actually learned what God had also taught St. Paul in today's Epistle lesson: that in some strange way, we are more whole when we are missing something.

Many of us have grown up learning that while we may have certain strengths in our personality, character or talents, we probably need to spend more time fixing or correcting our weaknesses. However, the reverse of that thinking suggests that we not concentrate on our weaknesses but instead focus on our own unique talents, so that we can maximize our potential. It's an attractive philosophy for business, but it may also have some real value in the way we see our lives as Christians. The crucial question, though, is what really is our true strength?

Is it any one of the many talents, abilities, attitudes or insights that we might have? Or is it something else? We all could identify personal strengths if we're asked too, and so could the apostle, Paul, he exhibited any number of different strengths in his career as the Lord's servant. As a former Pharisee, he was highly educated and a very impressive orator. His knowledge of the Old Testament was remarkable, and he could discuss and argue theology with the best of the best. Just as important, his dual citizenship as both a Jew and a Roman served his role of evangelist in whatever town he went too.

In addition to these strengths of Paul, he had a passion for the mission of the church which is to save the lost, a passion that has not been matched since. On three separate missionary trips, Paul crisscrossed the Roman world to bring the message of Christ's death and resurrection to countless people and places. And when the message he was sharing was not being well received, he moved on and continued his work.

In the chapter before today's reading, Paul offers a litany of his experiences as a servant of Christ. In comparing himself with others he says that he has had, "far more imprisonments,

with countless beatings and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches..." In spite of all of this, Paul was able to deal with everything because of his amazing gift of perseverance and the passion that he was given for sharing the Gospel with the world.

You and I also have important and God-given personal strengths. In Psalm 139:14, the psalmist writes, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." Each person, each member of the body of Christ, has been gifted and talented to the glory of God. While it is true that we all daily sin much and are indeed "poor, miserable sinners," we don't want to let those "poor" and "miserable" characteristics of our sinful human nature be all that we acknowledge or see.

Attention to God-given strengths is certainly appropriate, but those don't stop us from being "sinful and unclean," knowing that we have sinned against God "by thought, word and deed." No matter what natural talent or acquired ability or spiritual gift you have been given, those traits just don't erase the effects of your sinful nature. Too many times we look at our abilities, our talents, our good nature, our generosity for charitable contributions, or our acts of service and we conclude that we have something to offer to God. And while our personal strengths need not be ignored and can be used effectively for God's purposes, they are never enough to make our relationship right with Him. Certainly they don't justify us before Him!

Ironically, true strength requires seeing our weaknesses. Here again, we take our cue from Paul who says in today's text that even though he is clearly a remarkably gifted man, he also says that, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness." Why? What kind of wisdom is that? Paul goes on to tell us that "when I am weak then I am strong." Just before he says this, Paul describes an experience that he had when he was taken up to what he calls "the third heaven" for a glimpse of paradise. But in order that Paul not give himself credit for this or any of his other great gifts and abilities, the Lord allowed something to afflict Paul. He calls this the "thorn in my flesh." Whatever that "thorn in the flesh" was – and there have been many theories as to what it was, this "thorn in the flesh" caused Paul to see his weaknesses all the more, and it drove him to rely daily on the power of God so that he might better see that his strengths and accomplishments only came from God and were not his own doing.

When we are honest with ourselves, we all have to admit that there are certain things in life that don't come easily for us and other things that we simply don't want to do. At the same time, most of us have to admit that there are some things that we have a hard time dealing with in our own lives. These things might be physical afflictions, emotional trials, family challenges or whatever, and while you might pray for the Lord to take these problems away, its entirely possible that He may intend them to be a way to show you that, "His grace is sufficient for you," just like He said to Paul.

By that thorn in your flesh, the Lord can draw you closer to Him. He can use it to encourage you to lean on Him and to help you see that His grace truly is sufficient. This grace is His undeserved mercy won on the cross and by the empty tomb. His grace is constant for you, now in life and forever when you die. And it *is* sufficient for you! When our weaknesses get overwhelming, we discover in the accepting arms of our forgiving Lord just how much He has

done and continues to do for us in His uncompromising love. At these times we see that our true strength is none of our personal strength, but our true strength is Christ Himself.

Daily life brings constant reminders of some of our greatest weaknesses – impatience, greed, selfishness, thanklessness, and the list goes on and on, but all of these are simply characteristics of our sinful nature. The effects of this fallen nature weaken us, and as our health deteriorates, as our loved ones die, as our marriages seem to be unraveling before our eyes we come to realize that something really is missing in our lives. A piece has been cut out and is missing, and we are incomplete and broken. All of these are symptoms of this imperfect, sinful and weak world that we live in.

In sharp contrast to our life's weaknesses, which all of us embody, is the strength of our risen and victorious Lord and Savior, who has given to us the strength of His mercy, love, forgiveness, peace and hope. While some of the weaknesses we bear may never go away in this life, our true strength is found in the incarnation of Him who is not only our Savior and God, but also our brother. As the writer of Hebrews says in 4:15, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin." And He does not merely sympathize with our weaknesses: He overcomes them for us, and so Paul tells us in I Corinthians 1:31, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Our greatest weaknesses become God's greatest strengths. The Lord has taken care of the greatest need that we will ever have, which is salvation in Him. With that need met, He has filled in our missing piece, and showed us that in Him we are remade into the complete child of His that He originally intended us to be. His grace for you truly is sufficient, and thanks be to Him that His power is made perfect in our many weaknesses. Amen. In the name...