

Willingness, not Willfulness

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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“I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” These words from our second reading from St. Paul today do not make sense. In a society that values being strong, great, first, and powerful, why would any of us freely give any of that up? Wouldn't others take advantage of us if we did so? Who would want a more difficult life than they already have? Who wants to be vulnerable?

While all of these reactions are understandable, the great insight from St. Paul is that being strong has little to nothing to do with following Jesus Christ. That sounds very strange, but it is true. Remember that St. Paul, previously named Saul, was a strong religious person in his former life. He kept all the commandments, was obedient to authority, and even was willing to watch people be killed in order to maintain the purity of his religious convictions. All that changed when he became a follower of Jesus Christ. The strong, tough, and religious Saul turned into a weak, empathetic, and spiritual Paul. In the end, it is the second that made him a saint.

In his book *Desiring God's Will*, the psychologist and spiritual teacher David Benner makes it clear that being a follower of Jesus Christ is not about being determined or strong willed. It is not about what he calls 'willfulness.' While that may get us started on the religious path, he writes, “willfulness is both spiritually and psychologically destructive ...willfulness is stubbornness and rigidity...It's a grandiose, inflated self acting as if it is master and commander of the universe.” (22) In other words, willfulness is

to believe that, with enough strength, we can control everything according to how we think things should be, including God! But that is a lie. In summary, Benner says, “willfulness is the deadly fruit of the kingdom of self. (31)

As an alternative to willfulness, Benner proposes the idea of ‘willingness.’ Willingness is much different from willfulness. It is more like the ‘weakness for the sake of Christ’ mentioned by St. Paul. Willingness is the ability to be humble enough to allow God to work through us, even if that brings us constraints. It is to risk being vulnerable, even if that brings us persecution. It is about giving up our own need for control, even if that brings us hardships. “Willingness,” Benner says, “is the river of life flowing through the kingdom of God.” (31)

The irony of today’s message is that becoming weak for the sake of Christ is true freedom. St. Paul discovered this from his own personal experience. Whenever we are weak, we no longer feel the need to fight every battle, prove our worth, stress about the future, or win every argument. In weakness, we accept that we are not in charge. We simply align ourselves with God’s will and let God’s power flow through us.

*Desiring God’s will is a matter of willingness on our part, not willfulness.
Am I more willful or willing?*

If we are currently trying too hard in life or relying too much on our own resources, Jesus wants you to hear this: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”