
Grace and Power in Weakness: A Sermon for Independence Day

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
The Sunday after Independence Day – Proper 9 – Year B

The Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Corinthians 12:9

“My grace is sufficient for you.”

Here in the United States of America, this is the Fourth of July weekend: and we give thanks for the liberty and strength of this country.

“America, America, God shed his grace on thee.” Those lines are both a statement and a prayer. Indeed, God has shed his grace on this country. When leaders of our new country gathered to declare independence, when they gathered to write a constitution, God gave them grace. A hundred years later, when our country was threatened with civil war, God gave us grace—even in bloodshed—to avoid secession. The twentieth century saw the United States become a world leader in commerce and trade. When our country was drawn into wars abroad, God gave us grace to overcome dictatorship and totalitarianism.

Over the years, God has graced this country with pioneer spirit, with courageous energy, and with generous wisdom. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is because our country thrives that people want to join us. Thus, our country has attracted immigrants since our beginning. We have always needed new blood, and we will always need new blood. That new blood brings with it grace.

But here in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, the Lord says to St. Paul something else about grace. “My grace is sufficient to you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). In other words, according to God, grace involves weakness. St. Paul delivers to us today an important lesson for any individual, and for any country: power, good and righteous power, is able to acknowledge weakness.

The last two weeks in our country have been astounding. The murder of faithful black churchgoers in Charleston struck our land with pain and horror. How could any young man, any person, in our country commit such terroristic murder? Yet, that tragedy was powerfully answered by forgiving attitude of those left in the church. And—my oh my!—our own president, the President of the United States, seemed to find his voice when he delivered the eulogy for the pastor who was killed. His voice was searching when he started that song, but the organist and choir and community helped him finish; and he sang, “Amazing Grace.”

The country has reacted as if we too were a part of that grace. We have lowered and removed confederate battle flags. Even people who don’t necessarily think the battle flags are racist are removing them. Bubba Watson is painting over the Dukes of Hazzard car!

Also in the past two weeks, the Supreme Court delivered two opinions on subjects that almost everyone in our country also has an opinion about. With their ruling, our national health care system remains generally intact in its present structure.

And marriage, genuine marriage, between two persons of the same gender is permitted in all fifty American states.

Of course, our country has been arguing about those two issues for some time. It is the grace of our country that allows us to do such arguing freely and hopefully. Sometimes, those arguments have revealed embarrassing weaknesses, and they have revealed arrogance and fundamentalism, too. (Remember, by “arrogance and fundamentalism,” I mean, of course, arrogance and fundamentalism on both the conservative and the liberal sides!)

Still, we have learned that power is made perfect in weakness. God’s power is perfected in weakness. Personally, I support the two recent Supreme Court rulings, because they follow an important American tradition: to strengthen the weak. Our country has always been at our best when we have made the choice for the weak, the suffering, the minority.

Seeking and serving the weak, no matter where and who they are, makes this country who we are. And it makes people want to live here! But realizing weakness is also what makes each of us, as individuals, stronger people. Indeed, the spiritual life starts and ends with humbly realizing our weaknesses, acknowledging our struggles and pains, even searching for our weaknesses.

And the spiritual life certainly means seeking and serving the weak. In the wonderful “miracle economy” of God, God works like this: when we seek and serve the weak among us, we are actually better able to recognize our own mistakes and weaknesses. It is then that amazing grace occurs. One of the glories of our country is that we are able, with grace, to recognize our needs and weaknesses. I know that some of us don’t want to hear about our country’s weaknesses. Some people mistakenly think it is treason to point them out. But such is not the case.

This ability to acknowledge weakness, wherever it might be in our country’s structure, is exactly what makes the United States different from authoritarian countries, and from dictatorships, and from tyrannies. We are different! But our difference is this: that our greatness comes from being able to name our mistakes and weaknesses. We are not an imperial power, a power that blocks out all disputes and opponents. We are freer, much freer, than those countries of the world which seek to suppress dissent and acknowledgement of weakness. We listen. We learn.

And we hear, “My grace is sufficient to you,” says our Lord, “for power is made perfect in weakness.” We acknowledge weaknesses, and we acknowledge grace.

Yesterday, once again on the Fourth of July, I stood in front of the Cathedral of St. Philip, and blessed 60,000 wet runners in the Peachtree Road Race. Many of you helped set up hospitality and grace with me. The runners—and the walkers and stragglers—came streaming through in all colors and conditions. In the name of God, the God of all of us, I blessed them with holy water.

Some were strong. The first ten thousand, of course, looked quite strong. But then they seemed to grow weaker. Some looked amazingly overweight. The last several thousand, I would guess, would be considered weak by most any physical standard. They were walking. Usually, these last are not the ones who have their photographs in the newspaper the next day.

But this church blessed them, too. As usual, we stood out there for three hours (yesterday in the rain), and we waited until the very last runner—I mean walker!—had passed our holy church. Because we bless all of them. The Cathedral of St. Philip blesses both the strong and the weak. We haven’t made it to the finish line yet either, but we are trying to live out just what St. Paul heard: “God’s grace is sufficient for us; for power is made perfect in weakness.”

AMEN.

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