POWERFULLY VULNERABLE
Scripture: Mark 6:1-13 and 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

FOCUS: It is only as we confront our vulnerability, relinquish control and offer ourselves to God that we receive the power of God’s Spirit which can empower our discipleship.

We all like to be large and in charge. Oh, we may deny it because we know how ugly arrogance can be. We are pretty good at calling it out in others. Donald Trump comes to mind as do a goodly number of the presidential candidates. We hate it when we see arrogance in others, be they politicians, colleagues at work, bullies on the playground or difficult friends and family members. But the truth is, to some degree we all suffer from it. We want to have our way. We are convinced we are right and convinced those who disagree with us are not.

Think with me about the last time you had an argument with someone. Don’t try to play the “I don’t ever argue card.” I know better. For most of us the problem isn’t coming up with an example it is choosing just one. It might have been over something of no real consequence, something as unimportant as the position of a toilet lid for example. It might have been over political allegiances, it might have been sparked by the various Supreme Court rulings over the past few days which have certainly stirred emotions and created mean-spiritedness in some on both sides of the issues. It might be about a couple of flags. Whatever sparked it, I suspect that the argument was, in essence, about control. We want to convince everybody to see things the way we see them, after all we are right. We all seek to be about doing what we want to do, after all that is what this freedom thing we celebrate this weekend is all about, right? We loudly proclaim that others have infringed upon our rights. We convince ourselves that we have been unjustly accused of some indiscretion. So we become hateful, judgmental and bitter as we either bash those with whom we argue or sulk because we have had our feelings hurt. We want to be large and in charge. We want to feel superior to others.

And to us God says, ***“Give it up. Give up control and become vulnerable. Treat those with whom you disagree with respect recognizing that you just might be wrong on occasion. And even if you are not, those with whom you disagree still deserve respect.”*** What! No way. That just isn’t the American way. We must stand and fight for our rights, and for the truth as we define it. If we don’t look out for ourselves nobody else is going to do it.

In times like these we hear all sorts of voices, some them ours, some with whom we vehemently disagree, some we gladly celebrate. They say things like, ***“We must stand up for our rights to own assault rifles.”*** or ***“It is my right to participate in gay marriage.”*** or ***“No one has the right to tell me I must vaccinate my children.”***  or ***“It is my body I should be able to terminate my pregnancy if I choose to.”*** The list goes on and on and within this room there are those who stand on opposite sides of important issues such as these. I’m not here today to tell you what to think on these matters. Nor do I mean to imply that we ought not to have strong opinions about important moral and social issues. But today I bring all this up simply to remind us that when we get passionate about stuff, even worthwhile stuff, it frequently is because we want to be in control and we want to prove we are right even if doing so entails demeaning or denigrating another. We want to be large and in charge of things both important and insignificant.

So, as we come to the scriptures we have read this morning we encounter words that cause us pause. To a people then and to us today Paul and Jesus both say, ***“This thing called Christian discipleship is not about being large or in charge, not about always being right, it is about being vulnerable.”*** Webster defines vulnerable as. ***1. capable of or susceptible to being wounded or hurt physically or emotionally. 2. susceptible to temptation or corrupt influence. 3. open to or defenseless against criticism or moral attack. 4. (of a place) open to assault; difficult to defend.*** There is a fifth one but it has something to do with a hand of bridge and goes right over my head.

This morning, as every Sunday morning we are gathered here to hear the good news of God’s gospel message. And that news is that we are to make ourselves susceptible to being wounded or hurt, susceptible to temptation or corruption, open to criticism and moral attack? Well perhaps not exactly, but far more nearly than makes me comfortable. Let’s look first at what we encounter in the scripture we read earlier from Mark’s gospel.

The title of Thomas Wolf’s novel, You Can’t Go Home Again has become a cliché with multiple meanings. Many of us have experienced the truth that, after being gone for many years, when we return to the old hometown neighborhood it just isn’t the same. The corner drugstore may be gone, the neighborhood is totally different if not completely transformed. Jesus encountered a different sort of uneasiness when he returned to his home town to spread the good news of the gospel message of God’s love and grace. As he was traveling around teaching in the various cities of the Holy Land, his hometown of Nazareth came up on the agenda. As he was accustomed to doing in every town he visited, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, there to worship and to teach.

As you may remember, it was the prerogative of any faithful Jewish male to teach in the synagogue as he felt led by God to do. So it was nothing unusual when Jesus rose to expound on the scripture that day. He was quite effective. We read that the people were astounded. They had heard of his works of power, of the healings, of the deeds of compassion, perhaps of the spectacular way he rescued the day at the wedding when the wine was running low. And they could not argue with the value of his words. He clearly spoke with authority and wisdom.

But then someone began to stir the pot. ***“Wait a minute, this guy is no great teacher. He is a carpenter. This is Jesus, you know Mary’s boy, the one who worked in his dad’s carpentry shop. We wondered where he had disappeared to.”*** Someone else joined in ***“One day he was just gone and we thought that a bit odd. I bet he was running away from something.”*** ***“How dare he come back home and act like some kind of big shot. I bet this is some kind of scam.”*** another scowled.

Jesus was vulnerable. The Son of God knew what it meant to be criticized, to be wounded, to die. And he had the power to avoid it all, but made the powerful decision to avoid none of it. It must have been a gut wrenching thing for him to come home, full of anticipation, anxious to bring his message of wholeness and his ministry of restoration to those he loved most, to those with whom he shared a familial relationship. But it was not to be. He discovered that it is often impossible to go home again.

There is a poignant and sad lesson here for folks like me and like so many these days who are prone to skepticism. To be sure Jesus arrived in town that day fully empowered by God just as he had been in Capernaum and Jerusalem and throughout the land. But he was unable to perform many deeds of power here, because the people of his home town were skeptical. It was a dearth of faith which short-circuited divine power. It was a blindness to miraculous truth which cost them healing and wholeness. So it is for us many times. You see Jesus was, and his Spirit remains, strangely vulnerable to the whims of we mere mortals. The Spirit is eternally willing and able to empower and to heal in the perfect measure it alone knows, but God’s Spirit never forces acceptance. That is both the blessing and the bane of the gift of free will.

Jesus willingly made himself vulnerable even to the point of death so that we might be redeemed. Because we are free creatures, God’s Spirit is vulnerable to our whims and foolishness. Our proper response is to first accept the presence of the Spirit and then to make ourselves vulnerable to the Spirit and to the needs of others. The instructions of Jesus to those he is sending out in the second half of our gospel lesson reflect such vulnerability. He empowered the twelve and sent them out in pairs for a ministry of healing. Then he ordered them to strike out for their journey with nothing but a staff, the clothes on their back, a pair of sandals. And faith that the Spirit would be with them. That is vulnerability. We may not be called to be that radically vulnerable. But we are all called to put aside our pride, our arrogance our selfishness and to rely completely on the grace of God whatever our situation. Rich or poor. Weak or strong. Honored or despised, recognizing that we are neither large or in control, trusting in the God who is both and who will never leave us.

The text we read this morning from 2 Corinthians is a portion of a Pauline letter which both seeks to repair Paul’s strained relationship with the Corinthian church and calls those who are that church to return to their roots. As its founding father Paul was particular fond of this congregation as were they of him. But in his absence various influences had sought, with significant success, to establish their own authority by undermining Paul’s.

Paul hopes to establish his credentials without boasting about them. It is debatable how successful he is. You can feel him struggling to be modest, but he just can’t help himself. As I am frequently reminded by observing folks, the old adage that most people’s greatest strength and biggest weakness are one and the same is so often very true. It certainly is in Paul’s case. His brash self-assured nature both enables him to take on great challenges and causes him to come across as more than a little arrogant even as he seeks to be humble. He tries really hard, first using the age old trick of speaking about himself in the third person, but it soon becomes clear he is talking of his own experience, Then he says he isn’t going to boast about himself, but reminds us that he could if he wanted to.

Then Paul gets to the heart of his message as he reveals real, honest vulnerability. Recognizing that, in the end, his power is not his own, that his accomplishments are not those of a self-made man, he declares that the only thing of which he will boast is his weakness. He speaks of an especially painful affliction which humbles him and keeps him in touch with his morality, with his limitations. He calls it a thorn and notice that he attributes it not to the hand of God, but to the evil one. God didn’t give it to Paul, but neither did God take it away.

Not that Paul did not wish it to be removed. So painful and restrictive is it that Paul pleads with God 3 times for it to be taken away. But it is not. Instead Paul receives two words of assurance and comfort from God. My grace is sufficient. And my power is made perfect in weakness. For Paul, that is the final answer, it is all he needs. Does it clear up all his doubts and questions? Does it explain why he had the challenge in the first place? No, it does neither. But despite the unanswered questions and the lingering doubt it is all Paul needs, because his whole life is now about the Gospel of Jesus. And that source of good news declares unmistakably that people enter into relationship with God not on the basis of their strength, their adequacy, their merit, but precisely on the discovery of their weakness, their lack of merit, their reliance on God.

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, the progressive German theologian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century wrote, ***”Don’t blow your own horn! If you want to start a big movement, then go ahead and make a big splash; if you want to be renowned, then go ahead and sound off. But if you want to see God’s kingdom advance, stand before the cross and be quiet. God’s kingdom will not come into being by our efforts; only God can bring about his reign.”*** Blumehardt understood. Faithful Christian living is not about being large or in charge, It is not about always being right, it is about relying on God’s grace and being vulnerable.

Johannes Baptist Metz the contemporary German theologian understands as well. He writes in his book, Poverty of Spirit these words. ***“We humans are in the most awkward of situations. We have self-awareness, yet we are also vulnerable, fragile and dependent. We have needs we cannot meet on our own, dreams we cannot fulfil on our own, fears we cannot allay on our own. We have a choice between 2 possible responses: Frightened of our vulnerability, we may seek to establish our permanence, our completeness, our immortality by overcoming everything that threatens us. We may establish resources for our security and comfort and success as if we can be the masters of our own destiny. Except that we’re not, and deep down we know we’re not, so we live with the deep-seated anxiety that any moment the great edifice of our own making will come tumbling down.***

***The alternative is to do what the human Jesus did. We acknowledge and accept our limitations and embrace our dependence on God. And we discover there our deep fulfilment in the truth that our life only comes to wholeness in active dependence on God. So we no longer need to establish our own credentials or even our own security. We do not need to be noticed or heroic, or dazzle people with our cleverness, or cling to our own resourcefulness or win superiority over others or fight to avoid the time of our death. We are free to accept the things within us that are ordinary, weak, confusing, vulnerable, incomplete. Set free from pre-occupation with ourselves, we are free to love without reservation, we are free to be authentically ourselves, we are free, Paul would say, to allow the power of God to be seen in us.”***

As we come to the Lord’s Table today we come as a family of faith. We don’t come agreeing on everything. We come with strong opinions on important matters. We come with hurts and anger and confusion. We come with joy and hope. Through it all we come as family bound together by the assurance that God’s grace is sufficient. We come recognizing that the power of God is made manifest in us as we confess our weakness, become vulnerable and rely only on God’s strength. We come humbly and prayerfully asking that God enable us to so live that God’s strength might be seen in us.

For your sake, for the sake of an often arrogant but incredibly vulnerable world, and for the sake of the kingdom of the one whose grace abounds, let it be so. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.