

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 1:4-5,17-19; 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; Luke 4:21-30

Strength is a very tricky element in the spiritual life. We truly are called to be strong. As we listen to the reading from Jeremiah, we hear of the prophet who is going to endure many difficult things. Jeremiah articulated to the people the truth that God had revealed. God was telling Jeremiah he needed him to be strong. He was told to "gird his loins." But then comes that most important aspect of the spiritual journey, and the most telling thing we need to pay attention to: How are we strong? How do we become strong? Where does our strength come from? In the reading from Jeremiah, God tells the prophet that God himself will be with him. God himself will make Jeremiah strong, like a fortified city with a great wall around it. If you have ever been to ancient cities, you know they are usually on high hills. They have thick walls surrounding them that make them almost impenetrable to the enemy. There's something so strong about this image: "I will make this wall of brass." It's like a tank, like a metal skin around the city.

What God is saying to the prophets and saying all along to everyone is this: Power and strength are very important in the work of our spiritual journey. We need to be strong and powerful. But it's so tricky how to use power. It's clear from this reading from Jeremiah that the power has to come from God. But you know - and I know - that we as human beings are extraordinarily powerful. The human spirit is powerful. It has incredible energy. It seems to me that there needs to be an agreement worked out between our human strength and power and the energy that is part of the human being's nature - and the extraordinary power of God. How do they come together? How does that work? When we listen to the words of Jesus, he gives a completely different image of power than what I would consider the world's way of seeing power. I think the world's way of seeing power is that the power the world needs and wants to develop in people to be successful is human power. Human energy. The human spirit. It's about determination. It's about never giving up. It's about pushing and making things happen. It has a lot to do with forcing things to be the way we want them to be. Then we have this spiritual power. This Spirit-led promise that God gives to his people. He gave it to Jeremiah. He gives it to all the great spiritual teachers of the world. How does that work? How do we understand that promise of Spirit being given to each of us?

In Paul's letter to the people of Corinth, we find Paul recognizing a strong community. The Corinthians were extraordinarily gifted with the things of the Spirit. It was a good community. But they seemed to be drifting away from an understanding of where the source of their spiritual power came from. It wasn't as simple as saying that the marvelous things came from themselves. The human spirit gets tied up in the illusion that it can take the spirit of God and control it, using it for its own purposes. That's a real subtle problem. The human spirit has a very hard time taking on any kind of partnership. It's vulnerable. It feels very weak if it is not well-protected by itself. Look at the problems we have with intimacy. Often a very strong personality feels uncomfortable and uneasy in any situation

where they don't feel they are totally in charge. That's a kind of weakness. They feel very vulnerable if they are open. We look at this famous reading from Corinthians (it's a very popular reading and found at almost every wedding I do) about the great power of love. We hear about how different this Spirit-led power called love is from just pure human power. Paul saw the Corinthians as extraordinarily gifted. He worried about them leaning more and more toward their human strength. There was something Paul was attuned to, something he noticed. He obviously wouldn't be saying, "Wow, look at all of these mountains being moved. Look at all this wonderful selfless people doing extraordinary things for others. Look at these prophecies being proclaimed. Look at these people speaking in tongues. Isn't that wonderful?"

Paul had to be noticing something else. What he was noticing was an attitude developing within this community. He tries to say that this attitude reveals people who are not focused on the right things. They are focused too much on their own human spirit, and somehow losing a grasp on the fact that they are Spirit-led. When one is Spirit-led, there is a different attitude. There is a different disposition. Paul is very clever as he describes the qualities of a Spirit-led person. He calls it love. But he uses many negative images, which I find interesting. He could have used all positive images. But he used negatives to point out the things he saw. So let's just say that this is what Paul saw: Love is not pompous. Love is not inflated. Love is not rude. Love does not seek its own self-interest. It is not quick-tempered. It does not brood over injuries. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing. Let's imagine what Paul was looking at: People who were jealous. Pompous. Inflated. Rude to each other. Constantly seeking their own interest. Quick to lose it. Quick-tempered. And any time someone did something negative to them, they would brood over it. Work out some kind of plan of revenge. They would always somehow rejoice when somebody else fell flat on their face. Or when somebody else was wrong. I think if we are honest, we would admit that all of us participate to some degree in those kinds of attitudes. Even though we don't want to, they are there within us. It's always healthy to be aware and alert that this is going on within us. I think if we say, "That's not in me," we are not really being honest. We are prone to jealousy. We are prone to being pompous. We are prone to being inflated. We tend to seek our interests. We can very easily be quick-tempered. It's not too hard for people to go and lick their wounds if they have been hurt. What do we do, then, with this piece of information from Paul?

We recognize clearly that this human spirit needs to be looked at, understood, accepted, in the sense that it is part of us. It needs to be watched. It's like something inside of us that if we are not conscious of it, if we don't submit it to something greater, it really does get us into trouble. It's interesting that Paul goes on to talk about being a child and not really knowing enough. Eventually, we become adults, Paul says. I think that in the beginning, this is probably a good description of a two-year-old. This is the way children are. All you have to do is to watch children in the grocery store. I was in the store the other day, and a little child wanted some gum or something. It was really amazing to see this child screaming at the top of his lungs to his parents that he wanted this now, and they were ignoring him. Translate that into an adult in a business or social situation. They are not screaming or stomping their foot, but you can feel that same spirit: I want this to go a certain way. What Paul invites us to imagine is that there is something that has to bend in the human spirit so that it doesn't run the whole show. How is it broken? How do we bend our human spirit to the divine spirit? We see in the spiritual life a story that constantly goes like this: The outsider, the downtrodden, the prophet who is rejected, ends up being really effective. One of the ways we sometimes think about that is that if we really do the work of God, then things are probably not going to go so well. We are going to be caught

on the outside. We just have to suffer. That's one way to imagine this, but there is another way. Is it not so much that suffering and being an outsider is the result of being a messenger of God - or is it the prerequisite. Is it the initiation rite? Is it what we have to go through first before we can understand the message of God? To see suffering in this way is a different twist on our traditional way of viewing it.

Imagine the life of Jesus for a moment. He was on the outside. He lived in a small village. He was probably suspected to have been illegitimate. He comes into the world with any kind of major connection to the institutional religion. He's definitely on the outside, and yet, he has such a capacity to let himself be filled with Spirit. He gives himself over to a power that wasn't from him. It's like he knew what it was like in a culture to be powerless. He wasn't that uncomfortable, or at least he was trained in it. He was able to enter into that mysterious element called spiritual power. The real power of the spiritual person is in their ability to allow Spirit to move in them and to be the source of the things that need to be accomplished. If they are not comfortable with not being in the driver's seat, if they are not comfortable with being powerless, there is no way they can turn their lives over to a Spirit guiding them. In the gospel passage, we see Jesus coming into his hometown. He has been very famous in other places. He's been extremely successful in teaching and preaching. He has performed some marvelous miracles. He comes home, and everyone is excited about him. He sits down and he describes this passage from Isaiah about human beings finally being freed from oppression. Maybe we don't think that our ego or our human spirit is oppressive - but it truly is. Jesus is talking about something coming into the world to free them. These people, the Israelites, certainly knew what oppression was like. At the time of Jesus, they were oppressed by the Romans. Jesus says that what they are going to look at and see is someone who has been freed. This Scripture passage is fulfilled in their hearing.

For Jesus to imply that he was unique and gifted with this power within him, that he had given himself over to it, immediately cast him in a position of being better than. Listen to the way the human spirit just kicks in in this story. All of a sudden, these people turn on him. Going back to the reading from St. Paul, they are jealous. They are rude. They are pompous. They are worried about their own interests. They get really angry. They try to do something really negative to Jesus, taking him to the hill and trying to kill him. It's such an interesting shift. All of a sudden, why all of this rejection? Where does all that rejection come from? Why weren't they more curious about what Jesus was doing? Jesus had an instinct that they didn't accept him. That's why Jesus said: "I can't do the miracles here that I've done other places. You are not open to what I am trying to say. The miracles are simply there to enhance my teaching. If you don't have any grasp of my teaching, I'm not going to perform these miracles because it will make things even more confusing." We get the sense that this Jesus figure is one who is truly caught in the dilemma most of us are caught in. Imagine that this dilemma is going on inside of each of us - not just between Jesus and his relatives and those who knew him who feel like he is losing his balance. It goes on inside of us. It is that mysterious, difficult balance of, "How do I become powerful in the spiritual life? How do I allow the Spirit of God to lead me and not feel that somehow I have been made impotent or unimportant?" The challenge is to allow this balance to happen. Somehow the initiation rite involves experiencing being on the outside. Being rejected. If one can endure that without feeling there is something wrong, then maybe the human spirit which tends to be so inflated can deal with some rejection - and submit to something wonderful, more powerful, and incredibly life-giving.

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