

## **From Brokenness to Strength**

The Rev. Karen Swanson

This week-end we celebrate America. In doing so, it is clear that there is much to be proud of, as well as much left to be done, especially in the area of ensuring liberty and justice for all our people. As a nation we have faced and overcome many hardships on the road toward our vision of becoming the land of the free, and the home of the brave. Nearly half (46/102) of the first English colonists died during their first winter in America. According to one historian, the colonists “built seven times more graves than huts.” Yet, following their first harvest, they gathered together to give thanks to God for their blessings.

In both our New Testament lessons this week, faith leaders are facing a hard time. In the Gospel, Jesus is being rejected by his “homies”, the community in which he was raised in Nazareth. At first, they were “astounded” at his teaching. But then, doubt set in, fueled, perhaps, by jealousy and personal insecurity. The people ask, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” In other words, how could a blue collar worker be so wise? How could someone conceived out of wedlock teach anyone?

Paul, likewise, was struggling in Corinth. The community which he had formed were being swayed by other teachers, “super apostles” who boasted about their credentials, who believed they were qualified for their ministries because of personal characteristics, and as a result of the supernatural visions. They did not recognize the importance of God working in them, and through them, in the day in and day out joys- and struggles-of ministry.

How did these leaders of our faith respond to these challenges?

One can imagine how disappointed Jesus was. He had come home to offer God’s best gifts to the people who had helped to shape and form him, and they rejected him outright, insulting his heritage and his background (as well as their own) in the process. Their hearts were not open to the way in which God was working through him, and Jesus could do little for them. Perhaps he would have liked to curl up on his mat under the covers, and weep. And perhaps he did. But, it didn’t stop there. Jesus moved on. He gave his authority to the apostles, and sent them out into the world. Others might have thought it was hardly the time to expand his ministry, but this is exactly what Jesus did.

We can also imagine Paul’s frustration that those whom he had shaped into a fledgling Christian community in Corinth were being

lured away by false teachers who did not recognize the importance of God's grace and presence in ministry, who thought it was all about human gifts and talents. He was torn between asserting his own human qualifications for ministry to re-gain his followers, and pointing out that ministry has its origins in God, and receives its power from God alone. And so he talks about "a man" who was caught up into heaven to speak to God, but goes on to emphasize how that man was strengthened by God to endure insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities and a mysterious "thorn in the flesh." Of course, the man Paul is talking about is himself. He makes it clear that it is God's grace that makes it possible to endure and overcome the challenges of ministry.

Ernest Hemmingway once said, "Life breaks all of us, but some of us are strong in the broken places."

What makes us strong in the broken places? How was the brokenness of Paul and Jesus changed into strength? When we are falling apart, what can we do?

With aching arms we reach upward in our prayers. In agony, we reach outward to others. God comes. Gently, God holds us. Crying in sorrow, God comforts us. Steadfastly, God stays with us through the pain and the trauma. Gradually and mysteriously, God's

presence changes us. Our weak and broken places become places of power and value and hope.

The Rev. Dr. Robert Franklin, a Baptist preacher, tells the story of a Renaissance artist, a master at making beautiful vases. Considered the best in the world, others hoped to learn from him. One apprentice visited from a foreign nation. He watched the master labor week after week over the same lump of clay. At last it was ready, and the artist fired it, and painted it. He placed it on a pedestal for inspection. The apprentice caught his breath, and looked on in awe. The vase was a thing of unspeakable beauty. And yet, it appeared that the artist was not finished. In a shocking and dramatic moment, the artist lifted the vase above his head and dropped it to the floor, shattering it into a thousand pieces. Then quietly, he began to reconnect the pieces, painting each broken place with a paint of pure gold. Each crack reflected the invaluable metal. In the end, this magnificent, yet imperfect, vase became the most valued of all the artist's work.

So it is that, with God's help, we who fall apart and go to pieces are made strong.

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.