

WHY STRUGGLE?

Texts on Sunday, June 21, 2009

1 Samuel 17; 2 Corinthians 6: 1-13; Mar 4:35-41

One thing shared by all these stories we've heard today you have no doubt felt, if not thought—how their subject is struggle. David's struggle with Goliath has all the features of a summer action thriller, including a subplot foreshadowing his coming struggle with his own King Saul. The apostle Paul eloquently exhorts his churches to engage in the struggle of faith. Spiritual struggle is one of Paul's great themes. Think of his declaration in Romans 8, that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come . . . nothing! can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Now you've heard a bill of particulars fitting realities to that lofty poetry: "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hungers." Struggle. In the gospel of Mark, the sea struggles against the little boat filled with disciples as they struggle with fear. Jesus even seems to struggle with his disciples' slowness of heart: "Have you still no faith?" he says.

Struggle is not the special subject of just these texts. It's here—and there—and everywhere in the Bible—for at least three reasons. First, struggle is what we do. We are creatures wired for self-protection, and we struggle in all sorts of ways to feel safe. Second, struggle is a constant biblical subject because we don't do it very well. We struggle sour and grumpy. We quit. We cheat at it and deceive ourselves. We struggle with the wills of others, even though we haven't much power over them. And our power over our own self often seems paltry. Think about the New Year's resolutions scattered on the floor of your memory. Think about your addictions. "The good that I would I cannot," Paul says of his experience of struggle. We're not good at it—and perversely, we feel the burden of poor performance as one more added to our struggles. But finally, struggle is the constant subject because, though we are wired like the animals for self-defense, we are also wired to be just "a little less than God," as Psalm 8 has it. Paul writes "I press on for the upward call of God, straining forward to what lies ahead." We don't just struggle down here, but higher.

The reminder that everyone struggles may calm us a little. Wealth, fame, and authority do not pacify all anguish, we know. Neither does a good marriage or a mature, respectful cast of mind. Why, Jesus struggled! So perhaps we can at least stop struggling to be free of all our struggles. But what word can we hear today that touches deeper than common sense, a word that belongs in the heart of those who sing, 'Lord, I want to be like Jesus in-a my heart.' How can the Spirit of God shift your struggling from those worn paths going round and round onto the upward way?

Each of these stories of struggle presents one key on the upward way: *choice*. There is struggle, and there is spiritual struggle. The difference is choice—by which we mean *not* that you get to choose which problems you want to work on (goodness! that would not be a human life), but that you choose the mind you bring to your struggles. A spiritual life—a life in the mind of Christ—means you are learning to choose *how* to struggle and *why* to struggle—and to leave off acting like a horse's tail swatting at every biting fly.

Think of David. The fight with Goliath is probably a legend, but so what? Israel told this story a thousand times a thousand times: to strengthen herself for *spiritual* struggle. Unlike all the other warriors confronting the enemy, David does not weigh his own life first. To him, the conflict is not optional. It is necessary. The key that unlocks the door passing from ordinary "what-a-drag" struggle to spiritual struggle is this decision to accept that your conflict is necessary. You must be here. Your life has no other path, and never had. Because David decides that he *must* meet Goliath, he moves swiftly and

surely into the moment. This is why Israel remembers the legend so well. She is a little nation set down among giants—Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia. But so often in her trials she has been of two minds, trying out different gods like recipes for pasta sauce. What if Israel simply must have her conflicts—because of who she is, because her identity is to be a people chosen to show the world the goodness of God! Then she is armed for spiritual struggle.

Feel what happens within you, even for a moment, a twinkling of an eye, when you stop thinking of your struggle as a drag, as something a better person wouldn't be bogged down with. Hush! Muzzle that stormy sea of self-reproach. Peace. That grave illness you face. That difficult school subject you can't get around. That stuck feeling in your marriage. That hope that stays always beyond reach. You name it. Then choose it. Accept it. Look: as long as you linger at the back of your struggle, wishing it weren't yours, wishing it would go away, your wishful thinking actually keeps it there, running the hamster cage of your thoughts day and night. And nothing ever changes. But for just a moment, stop that thought. Think of your struggle as necessary. It is the way you will learn who you really are—and grow! Then you move like David into the field. This is the beginning of spiritual struggle.

Over the last decade, I was engaged in a weekly conversation with inmates at Attica prison. I grew in profound respect for the men I met there. Most of them had been inside for more than ten years; some far more than twenty. All of them had struggled vainly against the courts, the jailers, and fellow prisoners. Violence and deceit pocked their memories. But now, right there in that room, they were steadily taking the spiritual steps which most people, inside or outside, never climb. They were accepting that this place, those short cell walls, 10' x 8', this company of prisoners and police, and this self with this story was the palette they would paint with, or the toolbox they would work with. They were ready to climb the upward way—and to show the light that shines on that stair to any man inside who had come in despair to the end of his ordinary struggle to win by violence and lies. It is as if they had heard their God say—

“Let us go across to the other side.”

The word we translate from the gospel story as “the other side” is, in the original, just a preposition; the word “side” isn't there. Jesus says only “Let us pass through—beyond—go farther—cross over.” Where exactly he does not say, because this is not just a struggle to get to the opposite shore, but a new kind of struggle altogether, a spiritual struggle. Up to the point of our story, Jesus has been teaching his disciples in words and sayings for hours, maybe days. They have been struggling to understand with their minds. Haven't you been there? Haven't you labored to grasp what it is your boss wants, or your spouse or your teacher or your kids. Words! We struggle with them, but ideas don't change us much. One reason is, new words get caught in the web of our old fears, and fears are stronger than words. Jesus knows this. At the right time, he says, “Let us cross over.” Let the struggle shift to new ground, to spiritual ground. He gets in the boat, which is a symbol for the church, and he promptly falls asleep—on the cushion!

This is the master teacher, who knows you cannot shift your struggle from the ordinary level of resistance to the spiritual level of acceptance as long as you keep wishing the storm just wasn't happening. The teacher falls asleep in order to get out of the way, in order to shift from ideas and beliefs to practice—to give his students the opportunity to accept their struggle and act. He hopes they won't need to lean on him, to wake him. He hopes they have begun to have faith enough to know that like David, they can accept the serious conflict they are in as their necessary moment, and discover who they really are as they act to bring peace from the waters of chaos and guidance from many winds of the spirit.

But they were not ready yet. They were terrified and complained to Jesus, *Don't you care about us?* Jesus seems a little surprised. “Have you still no faith?” He doesn't mean “faith that I would save you

weaklings.” He means “faith that you can handle your struggle, that you can accept the storm you are given, and find out who you are.” But they are not ready. This is also part of our story, isn’t it, as individuals and as the church? How often we have slouched from the field of struggle with our addictions and our insults, wishing someone else would do the saving. In this sense, we are all disciples still—learners, not yet apostles ready to be sent out.

But apostles we shall be. That is the call of a Christian, to rise in the Spirit of our Lord and be sent out, strong for our struggles: “In honor or dishonor, in ill repute or good repute; if treated as false, yet we are true to our inner selves; if as unknown in the world, yet we are well known to ourselves; if they think we are dying because we relinquish our place, see—we are alive; if we are punished, yet we are not killed; if we seem poor, yet we make many rich; having nothing, yet possessing everything!” Where does the apostle find this speech, this hope, this certainty of victory in all struggle?

I’m going to have Moses answer that question, for the word of God in Christ was always here. “Surely,” says Moses to his people, “this commandment [for spiritual struggle] is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us and get it so that we may hear it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” (Deu 30.11)

The strength to bear with your struggle, no matter how it is severe, is coiled like a spring, inside a sound you can only hear in silence. Hush. Be still. You are alive eternally. Deep, deep inside whatever feelings you have that can be hurt, deeper than the hopes that can be dashed, more secure than any thought your skull plays host to, more final than your last breath—there is alive in you a witness who sees the truth, who loves all beings, whose life is already hid with Christ in God, who cannot be slain no matter how the contest turns. In the hush, do you feel her, life absolute? Do you sense his presence? Call this Christ in you, alive, eternal—never sleeping. You owe him something—one thing really. Practice the silence in which by God’s grace you recall that the life that is in you ever and always, beyond the threat of every peril. Serve Christ within alone, who has eternal care of you. Then, like David, run into the field of your struggle.

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