

**Sermon preached by Gwen Ito
Westminster Presbyterian Church
July 5, 2009**

New Testament Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Yesterday we celebrated our two-hundred-thirty-third year of independence. Today, at the end of the service, we will sing a hymn that could easily be mistaken for our national anthem. The words are an unabashed expression of love for a country characterized by “spacious skies,” “purple mountain majesties” and “alabaster cities.” Quite frankly – and with no offense to Francis Scott Key – I prefer it to “The Star Spangled Banner.”

Having traveled and lived abroad for a few years, I hope I’ve developed a relatively mature appreciation of everything our country has to offer, both politically and culturally. And judging from recent world events, we have many reasons to feel proud of, and grateful for, our democratic tradition.

But to tell you the truth, July Fourth has never been one of my favorite holidays. It’s not the holiday itself – yesterday, in fact, I read the Declaration of Independence and listened to Ray Charles’ rendition of “America, the Beautiful.” No, it’s the pomp and circumstance with which we tend to celebrate our birthday. I’ve just never been one for marching bands, boisterous crowds and loud fireworks. My paternal grandfather, on the other hand, loved Independence Day. He delighted in the grand parade that each sultry July would work its way down Temple Avenue in Ocean Park, Maine. A former chaplain from World War II, he sometimes wept at the sight of the American flag, especially when a miniature version was being waved about by his exuberant grandson. Gramps was a lifelong Republican and member of the Kiwanis Club; he had served as a town councilman after his retirement. The summer before he died, he was invited by the town leaders to ride on the fire engine in the annual parade. I’ll never forget how happy he looked that day; his body may have been weakened by a heart attack, but his spirit soared.

I do respect how my grandfather chose to honor July Fourth. I am just less comfortable with very public displays of patriotism, especially if they inspire an unwavering belief that we are somehow the best, and the only, nation that God has blessed. For me, the challenge is to feel grateful and respectful, while maintaining humility and a sense of connection with something larger than our national identity. So during a weekend when we celebrate both our independence as a country and our individualism as Americans, I would also like to affirm our interdependence as human beings.

We each have our own journey in this life, but none of us is truly alone. You and I have each other – when we allow ourselves to be brave enough to give, and vulnerable enough to receive.

When I volunteered to be a lay preacher several months ago, I did so out of a sense of stewardship, excitement, and to be honest, with a degree of hubris. I felt sure of my ability to ascend the pulpit, stand here in front of all of you and fill the sanctuary with elegant, upbeat pronouncements of my faith. After all, I had survived a year of teaching antsy teenagers in confirmation class. How hard could it be to talk to a group of reasonable adults for a few minutes?

But then something happened. On May 28, I became one of the many people contributing to the current 9.5% U.S. unemployment rate. One day, I was the cool copywriter at a glamorous ad agency; the next day, I was just another laid-off American. One day, a confident wage-earner for my family; the next day, just another middle-aged white-collar worker in need of a job.

Now of course, I was still in much better shape than many folks. But an impoverished spirit can cut across socio-economic lines.

So when it came time to begin thinking about this sermon, instead of feeling the words flow right onto my computer screen, I suffered some of the worst writer's block I can remember. Not quite as bad as my college days, when I had procrastinating down to an art form, but pretty darn close.

You see, it's hard to feel God's presence when you've been stripped of your familiar routine, are unsure of the next opportunity, and anxious about financial responsibilities.

It's hard to experience such a huge loss of control. It's scary, shocking and disorienting. It's a real ego killer, all right. Not since my divorce more than a decade ago did I feel so exposed and helpless. I told one friend I felt like I was in the midst of a career free fall.

It's just a tough time in this global economy, especially when we, children of the middle class, have become accustomed to planning for a secure and predictable future.

Yet even as my pride was adjusting to the surreal nature of having nowhere to go each morning, I was moved by something more powerful than my own self-consciousness and fear: the compassion and empathy of so many people. Some of these folks – a few of them are here right now – know me quite well and others, not well at all. They inundated me with advice, offers of help and words of comfort. I am still overwhelmed by their generosity of spirit.

There I was, experiencing anew something I had taken great pains to explain to a few dubious kids in the confirmation class: the force and beauty of God's love, as manifested in the actions of others.

Friends, the Holy Spirit is not just inside us, but around us. Indeed, God's infinite, immeasurable love works through each of us – and between us. It's a force so real and expansive, I believe it can flourish between Christian and Christian, Christian and Jew, Jew and Muslim, "believer" and "nonbeliever." *You* and *me*. God's power and love are felt in our relationships with each other.

So out of this crisis has come clarity. A renewed sense of what really matters, and how much we matter to each other. William Sloane Coffin writes: "Many of us overvalue autonomy, the strength to stand alone, the capacity to act independently. Far too few of us pay attention to the virtues of dependence and interdependence, and especially to the capacity to be vulnerable."

Today's New Testament reading is an excerpt from one of Paul's letters to the church leaders in Corinth. It's not the familiar passage about faith, hope and love that we all know from 1 Corinthians, but rather, a more abstruse passage from the apostle's second letter. I had to read it several times to plumb its depths. It's one of those scriptures that remind me just how much I don't know, how much I still need to learn.

Let me try to summarize. Paul has been writing to the early Christian leaders, who have called him out for not demonstrating powers suitable for an apostle. Referring to himself in the third person, Paul uses the rhetoric of a "fool's speech" to highlight just the opposite of what the Corinthians are stressing. His glimpse of paradise represents the most sublime of personal experiences; his mention of the persistent thorn in his flesh denotes the cruelest. Paul gives us a very dramatic description of the highs and lows of our human condition, reassuring us that through God's grace we find strength.

Now it's important to consider what boasting of weakness does *not* mean. By admitting our weakness, we are *not* abdicating our responsibility to keep trying and to do our best. In fact, it would be all too easy to wallow in our imperfect state, never trying to improve ourselves or change destructive patterns. The trick, I think, is to acknowledge our limitations without losing perspective and succumbing to despair. We can never let the status quo crush the potential for hope, and positive, healthy change. In fact, to do so would be to indulge in spiritual passivity or even laziness.

Remember what Paul is telling the Corinthians: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me." The language may be melodramatic, but his message is clear: his suffering is ultimately what saves him.

One Christian scholar puts it this way:

2 Corinthians fills much the same place in the New Testament as does the book of Job in the Old. It is a letter written by one whose heart has been broken by the many intolerable burdens heaped on him... If in Romans and Galatians we see the apostle [Paul] 'proclaiming' the cross with might and main, in 2 Corinthians we see him 'bearing' the cross, and bearing it triumphantly.

Have you noticed that this sanctuary has no American flag? I think that's a good thing. The purest symbol for us, as Christians in worship, is the cross. There can be no other. God is not a Buffalonian or a New Yorker. God is not an American. *God* does not belong to *us*. *We*, as children of the world, belong to *God*. And it was through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, his son and our Lord and Savior, that God's promise of love and salvation was fully revealed.

So there is the cross – the perfect symbol of strength in weakness, the ultimate symbol of God's love. And in a few moments, we will share in the Lord's Supper, another poignant reminder of God's grace.

Are we attentive enough to recognize it? Mature enough to receive it? Humble enough to accept it? Strong enough to live it, each and every day?

I know I don't always feel so strong. On more days than I care to admit, I falter – especially these days, when I don't know where I'm going, let alone how I'll get there. But I do know this: I am not alone. *You* are not alone. *We* are not alone.

We have each other, and we have Jesus. And even when we try to keep God at arm's length or shut God out completely, *God has us*.

So during this time of fireworks and barbecues, celebration and reflection, fear and hope, I would like to reaffirm not just our dependence on each other, but also our ultimate dependence on God.

I am reminded of a childhood friend who died five years ago. Diagnosed with a rare form of cancer at thirty-three, he ended up living several months past his doctor's expectations. He spent much of that time enjoying his family and reconnecting with friends. In the last email message I got from him before he went to hospice, my friend wrote: "One great thing to come of all this. I'm drawing closer to God and realizing that, in the end, that's all that really matters."

In a time of uncertainty, it's natural to feel lost, angry, sad, out of control, terrified. But even life's most unsettling free fall can become a gift that brings us closer to God.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," the apostle writes.

What better way to find our faith than to lay ourselves bare, embracing our humanity while allowing God's grace to flow in and through us?

We will stumble and we will fall in this life. And sometimes the drop will feel endless and almost unbearable. But *not* impossible. For when we find ourselves in a truly vulnerable position, I think the best way to fall – perhaps the only way – is *up*.

Amen.