

THE PARADOX OF REPRESSION

July 5, 2009

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From Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth; listen for the word of the Lord:

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Cor 12:2-10

On the one hand, Paul is engaging in a bit of self-deprecation. He boasts on his friend who had an after-death experience – even though it appears that the friend can't articulate what he experienced. But he refuses to boast about his own roadside encounter with the risen Christ – even though he is spending the rest of his life talking about that experience.

In fact, he does boast about it in other passages, but for this passage Paul has something better to talk about. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Our Lord has given Paul a fundamental truth that to this day eludes those in power, those who would gain power, and those who are forced to contend with the powerful.



This photo was taken on June 5, 1989. It has special significance for me because when it was taken it was still June 4 in Boise and I was still celebrating my 37th birthday. But, then, I suspect that many of us could say something about this photo – where it was taken, what had happened the day before, and how the actions of student demonstrators and the Chinese government have left a permanent mark on our worldview.

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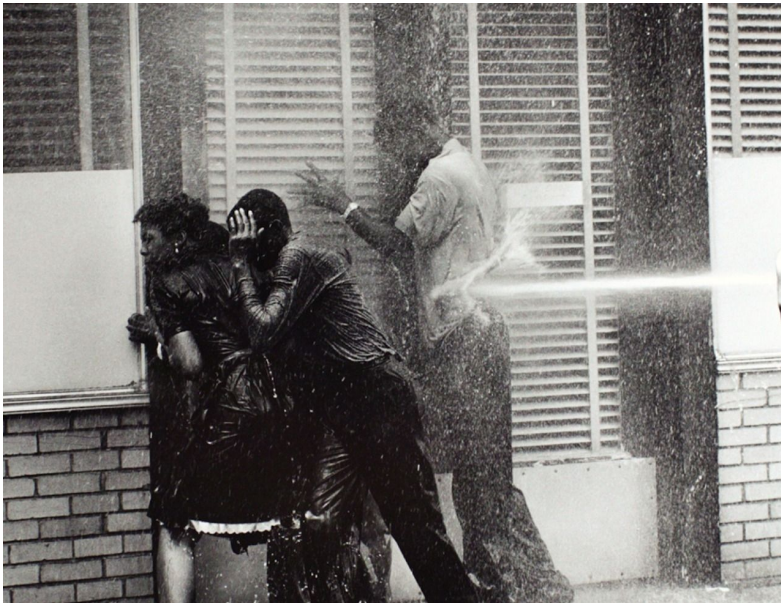
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But dramatic though those events were during the spring and early summer thirty-some-odd years ago; we don't need to look to China to find examples of power being made perfect through weakness.

The words that gave voice to the American civil rights movement were spoken from the steps of the Lincoln memorial, but the front lines of movement were somewhat farther south.

The front lines were on the streets of Birmingham in 1963 when non-violent marchers were attacked with dogs and fire hoses.



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The front lines were on the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma in 1965 when a group of people marching to the state capital in Montgomery.



The movement was carried on through the sheer will of people like Ruby Bridges who, at the tender age of six, demonstrated courage and determination that few of us can even imagine.



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There are other stories, other times, where the words our Lord spoke to the apostle Paul have turned the tide of human history.

We can see them at work in the early 1920's in India where Mahatma Gandhi introduced the concept of a peaceful non-cooperation movement in working for Indian independence.

Writing last week in an article for the Whitworth University News, Professor Patrick Van Inwegen pointed to a more recent example of the power of weakness when he described the value of non-cooperation as seen in demonstrations following the recent elections in Iran. He summarized;

Using non-cooperation creates the "paradox of repression" – when a government represses peaceful demonstrators who are demonstrating because the government is repressive, it proves their point in a very clear way to the rest of society.

It's important to note that these movements, in pointing out the paradox of repression, are seldom peaceful. Whether in the streets of Teheran, or Mumbai, or Birmingham, or Beijing the result is generally violent – but it is the repressive regime that creates the violence in reaction to the (generally) peaceful demonstration.

This past week our readings from Matthew have shown Jesus to be using some of these same tactics. Yes, he did get violent in the temple on Palm Sunday, but his target there was not the religious establishment but those who would completely disregard the holiness of the temple. He spent the rest of the week attacking the religious leaders – and not with violence, but with words; calling them to task for the way they twisted the sacred trust they carried as officials of God's church. So it is that in our "Year of the Bible" selection for tomorrow we will read these words:

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people."

There, at the heart of the church leaders' intentions, is the "paradox of repression." And Jesus' reaction, his painful willingness to follow where his God lead him, provides for us the most stunning example of the ultimate power of weakness. When our savior took up his own cross to suffer and die at the hands of the Romans he set the stage for a victory like no other – a victory that would never have been possible if the conflict had been carried out on the basis of human definitions of power.

Fast forward 1,750 years to Philadelphia; where a group of farmers-turned-statesmen made a bold and decisive move; relying, once again, on the power of weakness. It is instructive to note that we did not seek to win our independence by starting a war. We published a document – A document that ultimately declares:

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to

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do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

It's almost apologetic. We ought to be free, so we declare it to be so. There are no threats, no saber-rattling, not even a call to "take your troops and quit our soils." But isn't that the way of it. When we rely on strength of arms to extend the reach of our power, we invariably find ourselves in trouble. The arms we supply to a despot regime are soon turned against us. The invasion that seemed like such a good idea at the time turns into a protracted engagement with an unseen enemy. And all the while the words of the apostle Paul are there, patiently awaiting our notice.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

In a few minutes we will gather at the Lord's table. This is the great feast of the people of God. But it's not a feast in the normal sense of the word. This isn't the Golden Corral with thirty-six kinds of salad and endless desserts. Because that's not what the kingdom is all about. It's not about the quantity, it's about the company. This meal is a feast because it is shared by all who look to the Lord for salvation, in every time and place. And it's a victory feast – not because of some demonstration of arms; no, it's a much more impressive victory than that. The victory we celebrate today, and every time we gather at this table, is the victory won by a man hanging, suffering, dieing on a cross. Ultimate weakness leading to ultimate victory – a victory even over death itself. So we gather. We gather in our pain. We gather in our loneliness. We gather in our discouragement. We gather in our loss. We gather in our weakness. And we gather to celebrate – to celebrate the victory of one who would die, that God's ultimate power, the power even of weakness itself, might prove God's ultimate strength, and lead to our ultimate salvation.

Amen.