

As this is the Sunday of the Fourth of July weekend, we have sung “My Country, Tis of Thee” and we’ll sing “America, the Beautiful” before we leave. We’ve said a responsive prayer for our nation. Many of us have celebrated the Fourth one way or another these past days, perhaps with the Rec Center picnic and parade or with fireworks or family and food or all of the above; likely, our national thoughts have focused on American values like independence, liberty, strength, and freedom.

Offering up somewhat of a contrast to this is our lesson from 2 Corinthians this morning, a lesson in which St. Paul lifts up a different set of values: acknowledging weakness and vulnerability, putting trust in God, discovering that God is strong when we are weak, and having faith that God’s grace is sufficient. These two sets of values may not be mutually exclusive, but they do certainly offer up a thought-provoking contrast, as I said. Thinking about these two sets of circumstances, July Fourth weekend and these words of Paul, I found myself wishing for a story that might bring them together, and I found such a story. This was thanks to the article in our newsletter from our church librarian, highlighting a new children’s book that has been purchased for the church library, a book called *Box*. When I say children’s book, it’s definitely suited more for older children, maybe middle schoolers, and its themes are adult, to say the least, but I highly recommend this book. I’m going to give you a very brief synopsis of the story, as we consider our juxtaposition of Paul’s words and Independence Day this morning.

The subject of the story is Henry Brown, later known as “Box”, and he wrote these words about *himself* in 1851: “ I was born 45 miles from the city of Richmond, in Louisa County, in the year 1815. I entered the world a slave---in the midst of a country whose most honoured writings declare that all have a right to liberty.....I was a slave because my country had made it lawful, in utter contempt of the will of heaven, for the strong to lay hold of the weak and to buy and to sell them as marketable goods.’

Moving to my summary of Henry’s story, written by Carole Weatherford, this enslaved boy was one of 8 children in his family, working for his master and mistress from childhood up, laboring in the hot sun,

carrying heavy loads, witnessing the beatings and lashings received by fellow slaves. Henry's master dies when he's 15, and Henry's family is willed to the master's 4 sons, and so becomes separated forever. Henry lands in a tobacco factory in Richmond, where he sees that slavery is the cornerstone of the economy: there are slave pens, whipping posts, and auction houses all about, an accepted and expected part of life. Among the laws that restrict Henry's freedom are these: Blacks may not carry canes. They must carry a slave pass. No more than five blacks may gather, except in church, and then a white preacher must be present. It is illegal to teach blacks to read and write. Just imagine how such laws limited any opportunities that slaves might have. Henry writes of different overseers coming and going in the tobacco fields and factory, and of how some are hot-tempered and cruel, quick to hand out corporal punishment. Then one day everything changes, when Henry meets Nancy, an enslaved washerwoman. Her master gives Henry permission to marry her and promises he will never sell her off or split them up. Yet, within a year, Nancy has been sold, but at first the family is able to stay together, having 3 children and fourth on the way. They are a part of the First African Baptist Church, where Henry sings in the choir, thanking God for his family and his faith. Then things go bad. Passed from owner to owner, Nancy and the children fall into the hands a particularly virulent master, who pens them up and sells them farther south. The author of this book poignantly describes Henry's first-hand experience by writing, "For one last glimpse of my loved ones, I watch the slave chain pass. " Father, Father", my child yells from a wagon. I see my wife, grab her hand, and walk four miles along the wagon beside her. "We shall meet in heaven", I whisper. Then she is gone. Lord, what more have I to lose?"

Henry continues to grieve the loss of his family, whom he will never see again in this life. He leans into his faith and his church, as despair overwhelms him. He hits rock bottom, feeling utterly weak, vulnerable, and helpless, as the author writes, "What have I to fear? I lost my beloved wife and our dear children. Neither my time nor my body is mine. The breath of life is all I have to lose." And at this weakest, lowest point, God shows a way: while praying and working, Henry has an idea-- he will have a box built and mail himself to freedom. The box is 2 feet deep, three feet wide, and two and a half feet long, with three holes drilled into it for air. Imagine situating yourself into a box like that, and Henry was a 200 pound man. He is able to connect with

abolitionists in the north who agree to receive the box. After an incredible hot, painful, long, and terrifying journey, he is at last received and freed from his box by abolitionists in Philadelphia. He steps out of the box a free man and bursts into song. And he gains the nickname, “Box.”—the title of the book.

His remarkable story continues, as he enlists an artist to create a movable panorama of paintings in the round, to tell his story. He and this panorama tour New England, soliciting support for abolitionists. When a plot to kidnap him and return him to slavery in the south is foiled, he flees to Great Britain to work with abolitionists there, and he becomes a stage sensation, combining magic with abolitionism. He marries again and they have a daughter. But he never forgets the family he lost or the brutality of slavery. So ends my summary.

To my mind, this is an incredible and true story that is as *American* a story as any of our traditional Independence Day stories of Paul Revere’s ride or Washington crossing the Delaware. A story like this helps us to understand the underside of our history, the darker side, but a perspective that is so invaluable and important— to keep us honest, to keep us humble, and to recognize two things: any national story is far more nuanced than it first appears, *and* freedom is a very different concept depending on one’s status, circumstances, race, gender, and nationality, and that is true even to this day. We honor our good country’s rich heritage by acknowledging such truths, not by denying them. Because this story is, truly, an American story, and as such, it is a part of our story, too. Even if it makes us uncomfortable or sad; truth matters. Justice matters. Freedom matters. And so does faith.

Moving then from the first half of this morning’s theme—Independence Day weekend with themes of freedom—to the second half of this morning’s theme—Paul’s writing about weakness and faith—we see how Henry’s story encompasses *both* themes. For who could deny that this story of a slave seeking freedom is *also* a story of profound faith and trust in God? It is a spot-on example of what St. Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians. This is a rather confusing Pauline passage, so let’s ponder it for a moment. Paul is writing to a church that he founded some years earlier in Corinth that is presently in conflict and division. There is a group within the

church that is propagating teachings in conflict with Christ, and with Paul, and claiming the authority to do so based on their strength, their endurance of hardship, and their superiority of faith. American rugged individualism, perhaps, in a 1st C. version. Paul wants to counter their arguments without resorting to the same kind of arrogant claims of superiority. He does a little bit of a sly insertion of his credentials, referring to an ecstatic vision of Paradise which he had some 14 years earlier. He initially refers to it in the third person, then acknowledges that he's speaking of himself. However, he is quick to assert that although this direct divine revelation gives him every reason to boast of the superiority of his Christian teachings, he is not, in fact, going to do so. Instead, he attempts to defend himself without seeming defensive and boast of his credentials without appearing to be boastful. This is no easy task, which may explain the somewhat convoluted nature of our text. So stupendous was this revelation, that Paul was in danger of becoming puffed up, full of himself, arrogantly elated; but this was prevented by a "thorn in the flesh" that Paul experienced. We have no idea what this "thorn in the flesh" might have been. Suggestions have ranged from epilepsy to malarial fever to eye trouble to physical disfigurement. It's all speculation, we don't have a clue. But, it would seem that Paul lived with an ongoing, chronic physical issue that was burdensome. Three times he earnestly appeals to God to heal him from this thorn in the flesh. Like all of us, Paul just wants an efficient fix to his health problems. They are slowing him down. They make him appear weak. He feels vulnerable because of them. But, as so often happens, no quick fixes are available, and God is no vending machine of whatever we might want at any given moment. Like the rest of humanity, Paul must live with brokenness and vulnerabilities of all kinds---just as we have also to do. And that common vulnerability becomes Paul's strength, his way of connecting the Gospel of God to the needs of others, because *Paul needs* the grace of God, too. Just as *we* all do. Instead of a quick fix, Paul in his despair hears God say, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul has to trust himself, vulnerabilities and weaknesses and all, into God's hands and God's grace. Paul's story is one of moving from despair and weakness into trust of God's grace. Which is what happens for Henry Brown when he hits bottom and receives during prayer a vision that moves him into his future, but that requires

an astounding amount of trust in God's grace. That's how I see this American story of Box as bringing together themes of freedom and acknowledging vulnerabilities in order to trust in the sufficiency of God's grace.

So, I think one of our takeaways here is that our most effective witness, our most meaningful connections, may grow not out of our strength, our self-sufficiency, our triumphs, if you will. But rather they grow out of our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, our brokenness, that makes us just one more hurting person who needs the grace of God and the support of other broken humans. Recognizing our vulnerabilities and weaknesses is a great leveler for humanity, which otherwise tends to get categorized into free and enslaved, winner or loser, rich or poor, happy or miserable. Those situations that force us to trust that God's grace is, indeed, sufficient, are the situations that also grow our faith and connect us more compassionately with others who also are struggling. Who can provide nurture for a cancer patient, an addict, or one who is grieving, than those who have walked those roads themselves? It's not our *perfections* that make us lovable and effective humans; it's our brokenness and our humility and our trust in God. Lao Tse once said, "The purpose of the journey is to learn compassion." The bulk of our compassion is learned through our own suffering and acknowledgement of struggle, weakness, and vulnerability. That's how we know we can turn to Jesus, because He fully shared in our humanity with us. That's how others know they can turn to us or to God, because they see that we don't have it all together either, but it's ok. God's grace is sufficient.

Today, then, as we continue to celebrate the weekend of the Fourth, we are blest. We are blest to live as free people in our beloved country, but we are also blest to recognize the struggle for freedom that *has* been and that *continues* as we expand our understanding of truly American stories and experiences. We are blest as we embrace, like St. Paul, the reality that God's grace is sufficient for us, weak and vulnerable as we are. Because God's grace *is* sufficient; and God's power is made strong in weakness. It is this amazing grace of God that we sing about now. Amen.