

The Deuteronomic historian of the Old Testament told Israel's stories to illustrate that disobedience to God is punished and obedience to God is rewarded. That is intuitive, and it takes a lot to dislodge that kind of thinking. But enough arbitrary suffering can dislodge it, and then what usually develops is apocalyptic thinking. In apocalyptic, the faithful suffer precisely because they are faithful; there is a cosmic battle being waged and their suffering is not caused by an angry God but by God's opponents. That makes much more sense to people who are devoting themselves to faithful witness and service, and getting beat up worse with every effort.

Apocalyptic logic lies behind this part of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Many scholars agree that Paul wrote 2 Cor 1-9 in response to the appearance of "super-apostles" in the Corinthian community. We cannot reconstruct the super-apostles with precision, but most in the biblical guild think they taught that real Christian witness was authenticated by dramatic spirituality, that is, intense feelings, miracles, and revelations from God. By emphasizing these qualities, they adapted Christianity to conventional Greek-style religiosity that was famous for spectacular displays and intense emotion. It was high-voltage religion. ["Between Text and Sermon," by Ronald J. Allen in *Interpretation*.]

The super-apostles criticized Paul because he refused to separate the cross and the resurrection, and because Paul and his ministry were unimpressive by their theatrical standards. To them Paul's conflicts and suffering were evidence of spiritual weakness, as they would have been to the Deuteronomist. . . . But Paul inverts the logic of the super-apostles. his weakness and suffering are signs not of spiritual

anemia but of the trustworthiness of his witness. Why? Because his ministry partakes of the pattern of the cross as revealing divine power and purpose. Indeed, God is strong enough to appear to be defeated (the cross), precisely as the occasion to make foolish the wisdom of the old world (the resurrection). Paul's response to the super-apostles is **countercultural**. He claims that in view of the cross as the revelation of divine power, the norms that the super-apostles use to judge his ministry are outdated. They belong to an age that is passing away. In the world defined by the cross and resurrection, **God's power is revealed through servanthood**. [Allen again]

So Paul is invoking this apocalyptic logic to encourage the Corinthians. They're right to see themselves as frail and weak, but they are also going to win in the long run because God has their back. Afflicted in every way but not crushed; struck down, but not destroyed. God was going to have the last word, and soon. That made sense, just 20 or so years after the crucifixion, but as time has worn on, Christians have had to face the fact that the eschaton is not coming any time soon. So why listen to Paul? Why don't his words of encouragement ring hollow to us, 2000 years later?

I think it's because the proof of the pudding is in the eating—that is, the truth of Paul's paradigm of the cross shows in the *lived* life of faith, the deaths and resurrections that we experience firsthand. We battle the powers of hunger, injustice, loneliness, and falsehood, and we find ourselves afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down—but with reflection and contemplation, we also find that God shines light into the darkness.

I recently read two articles back to back that actually suggested this to me. One was written by someone with a mental illness—and she didn't say what it was—about how to be church to her. The gist of it was that people with mental illnesses often try to hide them because it's just too hard to explain, or they're anxious about what kind of response they'll get, or frankly they don't have a good grasp of reality at the moment. The author acknowledged that her behavior might be inappropriate sometimes. What she asked of her church family was to let her serve anyway. Even the poorest and most broken of us, she said, wants to give.

The second article was by someone named Greg Garrett, who says that religion—not spirituality—saved him. “Saved” is his word, not mine.

Praying to an unknown God did not give me hope or direction. Meditation only convinced me I was the wrong sort of person to meditate. Works of compassion I offered as an individual felt isolated and ultimately futile. Friendships even with other compassionate people didn't feel like communities. Reading about wisdom traditions and spiritual practice offered only momentary solace, and often I didn't have the strength or support to live out the insights I was finding.

On my own — without a formal tradition — I discovered to my very great chagrin that I was doomed.

I was rescued by a community of faith in east Austin, Texas, who were acting out their core religious beliefs. They saved me because their beliefs called them to practice love and compassion, not because they sought to convert me to those core religious beliefs. And they did more than just perform a rescue mission, important as that would have been for me. The good people of St. David's Episcopal Church offered me purpose, taught me that I was called to help rescue others, and supported me as I went out to teach, to write, to do the work for peace and justice that they inspired (and still inspire) me to do.

Religion saved me.

It's just that simple.

When I read this touching manifesto, I thought, There. That's one of the ways a very broken person can give. By being part of a congregation of diverse

personalities and abilities, even (especially?) the weak and gimpy contribute to a community that is defined by the power of the resurrection. Greg Garrett meditated and did deeds of compassion on his own, but he *did it on his own* as a very intelligent and able man, and that was not life-giving. It was in a congregation of flawed human beings following Jesus that he found abundant life and was empowered to carry good news to others.

Nobody would mistake us for super-apostles, dazzling with miracles and special effects. I wouldn't mind being a teeny bit more dazzling, like when we had a longer roster of people willing to preach, or enough high school kids to put on a puppet show about Esther. I think we'd all like to grow in numbers as well as in spiritual depth—just because it's good to hear others' stories and ideas, to stretch us and stimulate our minds. And get new recipes. But in the meantime, we're still very much qualified to do deeds of power in the name of Jesus—qualified not by ability but by the grace of God. We might consider that the weaknesses we know so well and struggle with would be, to Paul, evidence that the life of Jesus is also being made visible. Here in this place, God is working through each one of us and all of us together, and therefore we do not lose heart.

Let us pray.

God of the crucified and living Christ, we pray that we may know that you have our backs. You know our afflictions and perplexities; you know when we have been struck down so that we can barely get up. Give our community the ability to lift up and empower each individual among us, as you have done for age upon age. All we ask is that we may do your will, because in so doing, we realize true life. Amen.