

The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost – 2021

Isaiah 35:4-7a

James 2:1-10, 14-18

Mark 7:24-37

Conjure up in your mind the strongest person you can think of and, no, it can't be Jesus. I'll give you a second. Dream up in your magnificent noggin the individual who has made an indelible mark on your memory for their strength; what does he look like, what does she look like? Strength is a pretty non-descript word, don't you agree? The principal definition in Webster's Dictionary for strength is this: "the quality or state of being physically strong." Physically strong (okay). Here's the secondary definition for strength: "the capacity of an object or substance to withstand great force or pressure without yielding or breaking; tenacity; toughness." So, did you dream up a physically strong person or someone with grit?

Do you like being around strong people or does being around strong people make you feel like a toad? Good Lady Crumbs (the woman in our Gospel lesson), was she strong in the Webster's sense? Would you enjoy being in her company? What, exactly, is so compelling about this woman? Some guy I totally didn't know came up to me this week and wanted to talk about Christianity. That happens sometimes when you walk around town in a collar. He said this, which really got the conversation going: "There was a time in my life when I figured if I was going to be a Christian, I might as well be a good one." I had to laugh. Lots of folks are one foot in and one foot out; this guy seemed to be all in. "Okay," I said, intrigued, "what makes for a good Christian?" He said: "Faith is easy. Works are hard. Turn the other cheek, putting others above yourself, blessing those who curse you, going the extra mile, that humility stuff is hard." Only he didn't say "stuff." And I thought, what about that passage, that "good Christians" know that says "let no unclean word come out of your mouth?"

What makes for a "strong Christian?" Atlas is the Greek god who had to hold aloft the heavens on his shoulders – he is usually depicted holding up the earth. Atlas; he was one of the titans who rebelled against Zeus and was defeated. As a punishment, Atlas was condemned to holding up the heavens for all eternity. Some folks might think that being a strong Christian is never breaking. It's a lot to hold up, all those expectations, all that perfection, all that history of Christian virtue. What makes for a "strong Christian?" In your Small Catechism, in the section on baptism, Luther poses this question: "What does baptizing with such water indicate?" "It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." The problem with this is that the old, sinful nature doesn't want to die. The old nature wants to live and dominate and have his way. The sinful nature in you doesn't want to wash anyone's feet, let alone the scoundrel you work with. The sinful nature holds grudges, sees the speck in everyone's eyes while refusing to remove the log from their own eye. Have you coddled or crucified your sinful nature this week?

A pathetic woman comes to Jesus, seeking aid. You wouldn't know it by looking at her, but she is strong; not in the classical sense but she possesses a strength that your heart desires. Jesus is in the region known as the haunt of Jezebel, the most nightmarish woman in the OT. Good Lady Crumbs is pathetic because she has nothing to offer, nothing to commend her to the Lord. She is

pathetic because of her circumstances – her daughter is demon-possessed. She is afflicted, Good Lady Crumbs. A mother whose darling daughter is under a cloud of darkness, her heart is anxious. She is done pretending. She can't hold up anything. She is done with etiquette and decorum and pride and self. She falls at the Messiah's feet – a beggar's posture and unleashes her request. The response seems a little cold. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (Mark 7:28). She is a Gentile, not a Jew. But she is a believer; a strong one. The Lord is prompting her to find the heights of His virtue; and she does. Her response is priceless. Her response is gold and light and music and art and color and towering strength.

The youth group was driving through the Upper Northwest, coming home from a Higher Things conference, and we drove on a small road that bordered a river with a magnificent view of the Grand Tetons (amazing). I've been to the Butchart Gardens in British Columbia – such floral variety, such painstaking commitment to botanical beauty. When I drive down Dearborn, going home in the early evening, and the various hues of blue cover the sky and the hills to the north are silhouetted and the first few stars are out (stunning). I've been on an Indiana country road where the corn is everywhere and a perfect green, surrounded by a blue sky that goes on forever, and then there's a freshly painted red barn with the classic white stripes – one clings to those images when you see them. What does the Lord Christ see, in that woman? He hears her speak: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28). What does He see? He sees His love at work (the fruit of His life). He sees His humility, in a believer.

Humility is strength. Humility is Christian strength and it is alive in our time. Christ is at work among us to bring about the fruit of His virtue in you. All virtue is located in Him. He gives to you what is His. We look to Him! He shares His righteousness, His love, His humility and His mercy. You have received these things. Your new nature, raised in Holy Baptism, is a reflection of Christ and Him crucified. Humility; He gave Himself up to the shameful cross. Humility; He counted others more significant than Himself, washing the feet of His disciples. Humility; laying aside His divine prerogatives, He was born in a stable, laid in a feeding trough. Humility is in full bloom in our Messianic King and He is the epitome of strength. We rely on Him, not ourselves. We gladly take the crumbs that fall from the Master's table, being fed with whatever He wills to give. Humility is here for you to discover. He leads you to the heights by making you familiar with His depths – leading you to lay aside your pride and serve others as the Messiah has first served you. Jesus alone is your Sherpa to find the heights. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29).

The Lord Christ is our true Atlas. He bore the whole human race on His shoulders as He was crucified. God gave Himself into death to eradicate death. He saw His looming cross. He saw His approaching sacrifice and He said this: "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:31). He cured that little girl. He crushed the ancient serpent's head beneath His nail pierced foot. He is strong enough as a Man to shoulder every burden you will ever know. He is humble enough as God to sacrifice His life for yours. Good Lady Crumbs discovered the heights. She is our sister, strong and humble. When I see humility in others, I see something more stirring than the Tetons or the Butchart Gardens or a country scene right out of

Field and Stream. When I see genuine humility, I see Christ. I love seeing Him. That's why I love being the pastor of Christ the King.