

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – B (Proper 18)  
Text – Isaiah 35:4a

Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not!”

## WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE STRONG?

Health & fitness clubs are everywhere today, & some of them are quite elite. They aren't all the, sweat-soaked & smelly, hangout for boxers that used to be the standard for gyms years ago. Naturally, advertising is playing a big part in the establishment of any new health clubs that move into a particular market.

Here are a couple of slogans that I thought were clever & creative. Powerhouse Gym = it's the strongest name in fitness. Or, “You Were Born Small & Weak, But Nobody Said You Have To Stay That Way.”

Working out, eating right, having a ‘personal’ trainer, being disciplined, focused, & thinking positively, yoga, Pilates, core training, they're all different approaches people use in their attempts to gain strength, to be strong. It's fairly clear that gaining strength through physical conditioning is helpful for living a higher quality, or more active, life.

When it comes to the emotional & spiritual life, things aren't so straightforward. In our current culture, strength in those realms is frequently portrayed as never having to say you're sorry, always being right, & never apologizing. Those are temptations Satan loves to put before us when we're struggling in a particular relationship, with spouse, parent, or child.

We run into the same temptations at work in our relationship with customers, coworkers or boss. Dealing from a position of strength maximizes our comfort zone & keeps anxiety at bay. It's no wonder then that the world celebrates strength, & it's understandable why we make every effort to be in a position of strength. It's a matter of keeping our stress levels down.

Yet, strength to open a brand new jar of raspberry jam, & spiritual & emotional strength,

are attained along very different paths. Physical strength comes from effort on our part, exercise & eating right, while getting enough sleep. Spiritual & emotional strength come from trusting & relying upon our heavenly Father's effort, not our own. In the case of physical strengthening we are in control. With spiritual & emotional strength we must let go of control.

The apostle Paul was once a strong & unbelieving man, commanding teams of temple police for the purpose of locking up Christians. Once our Lord got a hold of him, his talk took a different tune: "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, & calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

That turns the world's concept of strength entirely on its head. In all those relationships where your anxiety is tempting you to take control, the most godly course is, more often than not, all about giving up control. Looking back, how many of our best laid plans ended up doing nothing but interfering with God's wisdom, & God's will, & God's design?

Think of the relationship causing you the most trouble right now, hasn't the thought bounced around your head that God must really be trying to teach that person a lesson? And hasn't it also occurred to you that thinking in such a manner usually has a way of coming back on you? Those thoughts alone will tempt you to anxiety.

When it comes to weight training, the words, 'no pain, no gain' truly apply, but Paul wasn't just some kind of nut who loved suffering when he said, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, & calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." No, our weakness is by God's design: "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong..."

In war movies, to surrender is weakness. In the struggles we face against our pride, or against what we think we need, surrendering to our Father in heaven is strength. And as backward as that sounds, it seems even more insane at the time you're confronted with the

decision. As Jesus said, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” The words alone sound backwards. Trying to live them in the real world is like trying to walk up an escalator that’s going down. It’s like trying to canoe upstream without a paddle.

It’s like you’re being shot at & the policeman coming to rescue you has a rubber band gun, but he’s telling you, “Be strong; fear not!” Or, you’ve had this argument with your spouse, or child, or parent, for the 17<sup>th</sup> time this month, & the answer is to surrender what lives right at the heart of who you are? The world will tell you, you’d be crazy to let go of it.

The temptation to be strong for ourselves is strong. But in a world broken by sin what does it really take to be strong, in God’s way? Does it always have to mean being last? Does it always have to mean losing? That’s certainly what the devil will say, & if our vision is only short-sighted we have to agree.

Not being able to see the forest for the trees is a common malady. It means you can’t see the big picture because you’re allowing the details to get in the way. The Gospel lesson for today has Jesus – God in human flesh – healing the human flesh of a demon possessed girl.

We see the brokenness so well. We see what we are missing so well, but our God rules the storms, strides across them, & is giving us LIFE. That’s the forest we often fail to see. Forget the details & look at the big picture. True God lowered Himself to take on human flesh. That’s how far He was willing to stoop in order to save us.

Don’t get lost in the details of which other sinner did what to you & when. Don’t get lost in the details the great sacrifices you have made. Don’t get lost in the details of how you have failed & can’t find it in yourself to believe that you’re forgiven. In these matters of spiritual & emotional strength, just let go of the need & the desire to be in control. Let go of

the delusion that you alone know what is best, & trust the Words & promises of Yahweh to guide, to direct & to bless you in the big picture. Let this be an illustration:

The cheerful little girl with bouncy golden curls was almost five. Waiting with her mother at the checkout stand, she saw them, a circle of glistening white pearls in a pink foil box. “Oh mommy please, Mommy. Can I have them? Please, Mommy, please?”

The mother checked the back of the little foil box & then looked into the pleading blue eyes of her little girl’s upturned face. “A dollar ninety-five, that’s almost \$2.00. If you really want them, I’ll think of some extra chores for you & then you can save enough money to buy them for yourself. Your birthday’s only a week away so you might get another dollar bill from Grandma.”

As soon as Jenny got home, she emptied her penny bank & counted out 17. After dinner, she did more than her share of chores & she went to the neighbor & asked Mrs. McJames if she could pick dandelions for ten cents. On her birthday, Grandma did give her another crisp new dollar bill & at last she had enough money to buy the necklace.

Jenny loved her pearls, & with them on she felt dressed up & grown up. She wore them everywhere, Sunday school, kindergarten, even to bed. The only time she took them off was when she went swimming or had a bubble bath. Mother said if they got wet, they might turn her neck green.

Jenny had a very loving father & every night when she was ready for bed, he’d stop whatever he was doing & come upstairs to read her a story. One night as he finished reading, he asked Jenny, “Do you love me?” “Oh yes, daddy. You know I do.” “Then give me your pearls.”

“Oh, daddy, not my pearls. You can have Princess, the white horse from my collection,

the one with the pink tail. Remember, daddy? The one you gave me. She's my very favorite."

"That's okay, Honey, daddy loves you. Good night." And he brushed her cheek with a kiss.

About a week later, after story time, Jenny's father asked again, "Do you love me?"

"Daddy, you know I love you." "Then give me your pearls." "Oh Daddy, not my pearls, but you can have my baby doll, the brand new one I got for my birthday. She's beautiful & you can have the yellow blanket that matches her sleeper."

"That's okay. Sleep well, & God bless you, little one. Daddy loves you." As always, he brushed her cheek with a gentle kiss. A few nights later when her daddy came in, Jenny was sitting on her bed with her legs crossed Indian style. As he came close, he noticed her chin was trembling, & one silent tear rolled down her cheek.

"What is it, Jenny? What's the matter?" Jenny didn't say anything but lifted her little hand up to her father. When she opened it, there was her little pearl necklace. With a quiver, she finally said, "Here, daddy; this is for you."

With tears gathering in his own eyes, Jenny's father reached out with one hand to take the dime store necklace, & with the other hand he reached into his pocket & pulled out a blue velvet case with a strand of genuine pearls & gave them to Jenny. Her father had them all the time. He was just waiting for her to give up the dime-store stuff so he could give her the genuine treasure.

So it is, with our Heavenly Father. He is waiting for us to use the strength He gives us to surrender the dime-store stuff, so He can give us beautiful treasures. He's waiting for us to give up the trees so we can see the forest. He's waiting for us to give up the details of sin so that we can trust & believe the big picture, & the healing power, of His forgiveness. **PAUSE**

What does it take to be strong? What does it take to fear not? It is simply faith in the fact that our Father in heaven loves us enough give the life of His only begotten Son, Jesus

Christ, in our place. Paul wrote it like this in Romans 8: “Since He did not spare even His own Son but gave Him up for us all, won’t He also give us everything else?” You see as you & I truly believe that God loves us unconditionally, then being strong & fearing not comes easily. It’s natural to us, at least to our saintly nature.

God chose those of us who are weak, in & of ourselves, because that weakness plays itself out in a willingness to surrender & turn to Him – for strength, for love, for blessing. Whenever we’re tempted to deal from a position of strength those thoughts are from Satan, who would turn us away & separate us from our Lord & Savior.

Isaiah’s assurance to all the broken people, who lack the courage to go on, & we’ve all been there in some way or another, is not in any way about what we can do, or even about the things God could do to make our earthly lives better. Isaiah’s assurance is simply our loving God Himself who stands behind all of history.

Losing our lives for Christ, & losing them for those difficult relationships we have in this sinful world, is possible only through the courage & strength of the Son of God. As the Epistle reading from last week put it so well in Ephesians 6: “Finally, be strong in the Lord & in the strength of His might.”

That’s what it takes to be strong, not trusting in ourselves in any way, but trusting solely in the grace & mercy of our loving heavenly Father, as evidenced by the fact that He did not even withhold His Son. Amen.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, & the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, & the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, & streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, & the thirsty ground springs of water... Amen.