

2 Corinthians 12:1-11
“Declaration of Dependence on God”
July 3, 2011 Maple Grove UMC

Grace to you and peace in Christ Jesus our Lord. How I have looked forward to seeing your faces, Maple Grove Church! I am honored and blessed to serve as your pastor and am delighted to be here at last today at last. So let's introduce ourselves, shall we? My name is Pastor Glenn. What's yours? . . . I feel better now that we all know each other, don't you? No name tests for a few months, though, okay?

Will you pray with me: May the things that I say, and even the things that we think in our hearts, be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another . . .” So begins the Declaration of Independence, known to almost everyone, foundational to our nation's ethos. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . .” It leads up to this stirring conclusion: “We, therefore, . . .solemnly

publish and declare, that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states.”

The problem, I would suggest, is not that we Americans haven't learned the lesson of this Declaration. The problem, I would say, is that we've learned it too well. 'Rugged individualism' is our ideal. Our theme song might be, "I Did It My Way." Some senior citizens miss doctor's appointments or put themselves in harm's way because they don't want to "impose" on anyone. And while opinion polls show that almost all American says they believe in God, there's precious little evidence that many of us depend on God.

In politics surely the Declaration of Independence has it right. In our personal lives, however, and especially in our spiritual lives, complete independence is not so desirable. God taught the apostle Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you." Therefore, Paul said, "when I am weak, that's when I am strong." In fact, one way of looking at it is this: the Christian life is the process of learning to depend on God.

That, however, is not how Paul's opponents at Corinth understood the Christian life. Paul had founded the church at Corinth, but then other preachers came in behind him. And you know

how new preachers are . . . Oh, these new preachers knew a lot. They were good looking. They were flashy and persuasive. The problem was they tended to rely on their own wisdom and their own strength, while the true mark of authenticity and maturity in preaching is not eloquence and impressiveness—but the extent to which you have learned to depend on God.

This, of course, is not a surprising message, if you know the Bible. In Judges 6 Gideon started out with 32,000 soldiers to do battle with Midian. But God said to Gideon, “That’s too many soldiers. If I give you victory with that many soldiers, you’ll take credit for it instead of giving me credit for it. So in various ways, the Lord reduced the soldiers from 32,000 to just 300, and then sent Gideon against the Midianites who, it says, were thick as locusts. And the Lord gave the Midianites into their hands. It was not a lesson in military strategy; it was a lesson in learning to depend on God.

One time Jesus’ disciples were out in a boat when Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. Seeing this, Peter said to Jesus, “Lord if it’s really you, command me to come to you on the water.” So Jesus said, “Come on then.” And Peter stood up, gulped, and stepped out of the boat. And though he later got frightened and

started to sink, for a moment, he did it—he walked on water. This was not a lesson in water skiing; it was a lesson in learning to depend on Christ.

Some people learn to depend on God willingly, though most of us do not. Paul freely admits that it was a lesson he didn't sign up for. Paul's nature was towards spiritual pride, towards thinking rather too highly of himself. So to teach him the lesson, God gave Paul what he called a "thorn in the flesh." Scholars have debated for centuries what this "thorn in the flesh" might have been—epilepsy, migraine, a speech impediment. The truth is, we don't know. The point is that Paul prayed repeatedly for God to take that "thorn in the flesh" away, but God said, "No, my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." When *I* am weak, Paul learned, when I depend on God—that's when I am strong.

I learned something about depending on God after I'd been in ministry about ten years. I take being a pastor seriously; I like to have answers for questions and a plan for every situation. But in that season, things were not going well, and I was dogged by

disappointment and discouragement. Like Paul, I prayed to be relieved of those feelings, those thorns in my flesh. But they persisted.

At about that same time, we were becoming aware that that church building had serious issues—the roof leaked, the bricks were crumbling, the basement was wet. We either had to get to fix the building or we'd have to leave and meet somewhere else. We got estimates and found that just to do the most critical repairs would require more money than our entire annual budget, and we were struggling just to meet that. I felt so responsible to do something, to come up with a plan, to be strong for the congregation. But the truth is, I had no idea what to do—I had no plan, no strength to offer.

So I began to tell God that in prayer—I'm up, Lord. One day, it's like I heard God say to me, "So you've finally got no plan, no strength of your own? Good! So get out of the way and watch me." I walked into the Leadership Team meeting that evening. I laid out the situation and told them God had told me to get out of the way. I said I'd be in my office and for them to come get me when they'd decided what to do. I prayed with them and left.

A couple of hours later they came and got me, and they had it all mapped out on the board—what repairs to do and in what order, the outline of a capital campaign and who would lead it. And I just sat down and wept. God's grace really was sufficient for me. When I was weak, then God could be strong. I hadn't wanted to learn it, but I learned it. And the way they mapped it out that evening was exactly the way it came to pass.

So, my new friends, my question to you this Independence weekend is this: where in your life do you need to declare not your independence, but your dependence on God? Where do you need to acknowledge your own weakness so that God can be your strength? Do you try so hard to stay in control of things that there isn't any room for God to be in control? Are there situations or problems in your life that you have turned over to God, but then keep taking them back? Do you try so desperately to be tough and strong that there's no way for you to learn that God's grace really is all you need? This Independence Day, where do you need to declare instead your dependence on God?

Today, Maple Grove Church, we introduce ourselves to each other, pastor and people. Let us make our start, then, not with our own strength and agendas, but with God's strength and God's grace. Let us start with a Declaration of Dependence on God. As selected representatives of the congregation come forward to kneel with me, I invite you all to stand. As printed on the front of your bulletin, let us make our start together by declaring our mutual dependence on God.