

## Strength in Weakness Proper 9B/ 5 Pentecost B

Kenneth Lay, age 64, died last Wednesday, July 5, of an apparent heart attack. The ENRON founder, along with CEO Jeff Skilling were convicted of defrauding investors and employees by lying about ENRON's financial strength. While undergoing bankruptcy protection in 2001 they continued to encourage investments. Lay was also convicted of bank fraud in a separate trial related to false statements on personal finances. What happened to Kenneth Lay, a man revered for his philanthropy and hailed by his pastor as an honorable man? Perhaps Lay was just another Sunday Christian who sang and said the right things before the right people. But trouble is trouble does.

Lay was hailed as taking Enron, a natural gas pipeline company to its height as energy and trading conglomerate. It was No. 7 on the Fortune 500 in 2000 and claimed \$101 billion in annual revenues. In the end, the federal government sought a \$43.5 million judgment from Lay despite a personal debt of \$100 million dollars. To the end he defended his extravagant lifestyle, including a \$200,000 yacht for his wife's birthday. During his trial he was arrogant, irritable and combative before a jury in Houston that ignored his immense popularity in that city. In Aspen, CO, they praised his generosity. His friend, President George W. Bush when asked about Lay's death commented, "I hope his heart was right with the Lord." He believed he had done no wrong. Lay was to be sentenced on October 23. Perhaps in his weakness, Kenneth Lay might have found strength from this thorn in the flesh. Perhaps in prison expected to be for decades, Lay might have found strength in his weakness. Death cheated the government and the people Lay served. Most of all, death cheated Kenneth Lay of finding the forgiveness he could not admit he needed.

Same thing happened to the apostle Paul after he was stabbed with a "thorn" in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7). We don't know exactly what this thorn was, although biblical scholars have suggested that it could have been anything from epilepsy to stuttering, depression to eye problems. What's important is that Paul considered this affliction to be a painful trap or torture designed to take him out of the spiritual battle plan.

Back in the first century, sharpened wooden stakes were often placed in pits, with the hope that enemy soldiers would fall on them and be impaled. These stakes were also used as a method of torture. Sharpened stakes were the roadside bombs of the ancient world, and they were described in Greek by the word *skolops* — the exact same word that Paul uses for his thorn in the flesh.

So Paul was stabbed — by a messenger of Satan, he says — “to torment me, to keep me from being too elated” (v. 7). He could have given up, assuming that his life as an apostle was over. But instead, he discovered that it was just beginning.

Three times he pleaded with the Lord to remove the *skolops*, but God said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9).

Power is made perfect in weakness. When the bomb went off on a road near Baghdad, Hilbert Caesar thought his life was over.

What he discovered was ... it was just beginning.

According to *The Washington Post* (November 26, 2005), Army staff sergeant Caesar was in charge of a long-range 155mm howitzer — a self-propelled gun that resembles a tank. He was out on patrol in Iraq when a roadside bomb exploded. When the smoke cleared, Caesar looked down and saw that his right leg was severed in three places, flipped backward, just dangling by the skin. He tried to give his machine gun to a fellow soldier, but discovered it was bent. Then he yelled for the howitzer hatches to be closed, and thought to himself, “Oh man. This is it. My life is over.”

But he didn't die. The insurgents responsible for the attack disappeared, and Caesar was transported to safety. At Walter Reed Hospital, his missing limb was replaced with an artificial leg of plastic and steel.

Still, he felt despair about his future. He was in pain, and was worried that he'd never be able to run again, or be attractive to women. He received word that eight men from his platoon had been killed by a car bomb in Baghdad, including one of his role models. The news was devastating. As amputee Hilbert Caesar says, “It makes me appreciate life a whole lot more.”

Power is made perfect in weakness. As Adam Replogle, a tank gunner who lost his left hand in Iraq, says, “Sometimes it takes people a lifetime to realize what it’s all about ... you go through something like this and it grows you up a little bit.”

Power is made perfect in weakness. As Tom McNish, a former Air Force pilot who was a prisoner in North Vietnam, reflects: “There is no question in my mind that the experience I had in Vietnam has had an overall very positive effect on my life.”

Not that McNish recommends it for anyone else. Or that he would want to do it again. It was truly a time of suffering, after all. But you can’t have post-traumatic growth without trauma.

Think of a time when you have experienced spiritual growth. A shift in priorities. An increase in personal strength. A renewed appreciation for life. A deepening of personal relationships. Have these improvements been the result of smooth sailing and easy living? Do you think you can be a Sunday Christian and have the spiritual reserve needed when your life is turned upside down?

Hardly. These kinds of growth come from stress, struggle and suffering.

I remember steaming in the middle of the Atlantic on the USS Mississippi, a nuclear cruiser, when radio received a Red Cross message for me, the chaplain of the ship. My mother-in-law had collapsed from a brain tumor and was in surgery. My father-in-law fell apart. To help him my ex-wife asked me to come home and take care of the kids who were young and in school. The Captain said there was no way he could get me off the ship. No phones, no email then, no available helicopters where we were, but a brief conversation on ham radio to relay the news to my wife. It was a very helpless, hopeless feeling, knowing my son and daughter were farmed out to neighbors we hardly knew.

Each of us can tell such a tale, and there are bound to be several unifying themes. First, *trauma moves us from isolation to community.*

And second, *trauma shifts us from self-reliance to God-reliance.*

Sunday Christians and Christmas and Easter Christians who fail to live each day God reliant and connected to the faith community have no such power from weakness to draw on.

Looking back on his experience in battle, Hilbert Caesar says, “The guys I served with were awesome guys.” Times of pain and suffering can force us to turn to each other, rely on each other, and serve each other — sometimes in sacrificial ways. “I would go through it again — for the guys I served with,” Caesar insists. “Yes. Absolutely. I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

In the life of the church, it is typically trauma that moves us from isolation to community. Sure, festivities can be fun, but their effect is usually superficial. What binds us together as members of the Body of Christ are illness, grief, struggle, adversity, confusion and crisis.

Weakness is common to all of us. There is a Kenneth Lay in all of us. And what if Lay could come back from death and talk to us about his life? What would he say? Was it worth the pain and sorrow to amass such wealth for the good of a few? The words from scripture come to mind: “Store up treasure for yourselves in heaven where moth and rust do not decay and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).

But there is also incredible strength as found when the Hilbert Caesar in all of us finds a living faith that takes hold of the wounds of Jesus Christ.

I challenge you today to go from Sunday Christian, saying and singing all the right words, to a vibrant man or woman of faith seeking to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. A friend of Trinity last week shared with me this missing piece of teaching in churches today: the striving for perfection – being completed and purified by faith and a thirst for righteousness. May we strive and be bold in our struggle for to make our faith living every day! Amen.