

Father O'Connor's Homily for 8 February 2026  
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time-A

Isaiah 58: 7-10  
1 Corinthians 2: 1-5  
Matthew 5: 13-16

“I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling ... so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”

That is what Saint Paul told us in the second reading today from his First Letter to the Corinthians. You and I have been blessed by God with intelligence and talent and opportunities – in different ways, of course, and in varying amounts. But there is something that we all have in common with Saint Paul: our weaknesses.

Let us just say it out loud and admit it. We all have weaknesses, don't we? Saint Paul is telling us what we are supposed to do with them: we are to put our weaknesses in the hands of God and bring to light the life-changing power of God's grace.

So I would like to take Saint Paul's lesson for us – “I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling ... so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” – and illustrate it with a human experience... in a story.

This is a story that was written by Jack Riener, and it appeared in the **Houston Chronicle** on 10 February 2001 – 25 years ago. Whether it is pure history, or whether it is a bit of historical fiction, the jury is still out. But nonetheless, this story does drive home a powerful point. As someone put it, “If it isn't true, it out to be.” And because Jack Riener writes so well, I am going to allow him to tell you his story in his own words:

“On 18 November 1995, Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, came on stage to give a concert at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City. If you have ever been to a Perlman concert, you know that getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child, and so he has braces on both legs, and he walks with the aid of two crutches.

“To see him walk across the stage one step at a time is an unforgettable sight. He walks painfully, yet majestically, until he reaches his chair. Then he sits down slowly, puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward.

Then he bends down and picks up his violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor, and proceeds to play.

“By now, the audience is used to this ritual. But this time, something went wrong. Just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap. It went off like gunfire across the room.

“People who were there thought to themselves, ‘We figured he would have to put on the clasps again, pick up the crutches and limp his way off stage – to either find another violin or else find another string for this one. Or he would have to wait for someone to bring him another.’

“But he didn’t. Instead, he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again, and he played from where he had left off. He played with such passion and such power and such purity as they had never heard before.

“Of course, everyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. But that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him re-arranging the piece in his head. At one point, it sounded like he was re-tuning the strings to get new sounds from them that they had never made before.

“When he finished, there was an awesome silence in the room. And then we were all on our feet, screaming and cheering, doing everything we could to show him how much we appreciated what he had done.

“He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone, ‘You know, sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.’”

Jack Riemer continues:

“What a powerful line that is. It has stayed in my mind ever since I heard it. And who knows? Perhaps that is the way of life – not just for artists but for all of us.

“Here is a man who has prepared all his life to make music on a violin with four strings who, all of a sudden, in the middle of a concert, finds himself with only three. So he makes music with three strings, and the music he made that night with just three strings was more beautiful, more memorable, than any that he had ever made before, when he had all four strings.

*(So, perhaps this is like what Saint Paul is saying.)* “Our task in this shaky, fast-changing, bewildering world is to make music. At first with all

that we have. And then, when that is no longer possible, to make music with what we have left.”

Right now, you may feel up-in-years, with declining health, and maybe a bit insecure or depressed. You may feel alone, hurting or grieving. You may feel that you have lost one string, and now have only three to play with. But the challenge is the same for all of us: to make music with what we have, and then with what we have left.

Like Saint Paul, we are to put our weaknesses in the hands of God and give witness to the life-changing power of God’s grace.

To bring this thought even closer to home, I am thinking of people that I have known over the years who are part of those life-saving “Anonymous Fellowships” – like Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous – who, one day at a time, remain sober with the help of God and with the help of others. And how do they do this? By helping somebody else to remain sober today too. They know what it is like. As we sang in today’s Responsorial Psalm, “The just one is a light in darkness to the upright” [Psalm 112].

I think of people I have known over the years who have lost someone they dearly love, and they grieve. And what do so many of them do? They go out to someone else who has lost someone that they love, and they try to comfort and encourage them. They know how because they know what it is like. They share the light.

I think of people who, because of a divorce or a financial setback or both, have felt their world collapse. And what do so many of them do? They go out and help somebody else who has suffered a loss. And why is their compassion so convincing? Because they too know what it is like. They share the light.

Saint Paul says, “I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling ... so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”

Like Saint Paul, we all have our weaknesses. But with God’s grace, we can still make music with what we have, and with what we have left.

And today is a God-given opportunity for all of us three-stringed players to witness to others the life-changing power of God’s grace. And to do so convincingly. Because we know what it is like, we can share the light.