

II Corinthians 12:2-10 ¹ It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. ³ And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— ⁴ was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. ⁵ On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶ But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷ even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸ Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹ but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

II Corinthians 12:2-10

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“The Strength of Our Weaknesses”

Rev. Amy Terhune

“Following his service as Prime Minister of Great Britain during the dark days of World War II, Winston Churchill was invited to speak at Harrow, his boyhood grammar school, from which he had graduated some seventy years before. As he stood at the lectern, looking out at his young audience, he said, “Young men, never give up! Never give up! Never! Never! Never!” With that he sat down. The audience was stunned. The message was so brief. Yet, in this succinct message, the man who had kept England going in such difficult times was stating the philosophy of perseverance that had led to victory. It is a characteristic that we admire, and which we have been taught to emulate.

“But then I’m reminded of a woman golfer who finished last in the Shawnee Golf Invitational for Ladies some years ago. When she teed off at the sixteenth hole, her drive went directly into a nearby river. She gamely set out in a rowboat to play the ball. When she finally succeeded in stroking it out of the water, it landed in dense woods. From there she drove the ball into the rough, then into a sand trap, then back into the rough. Two hours later she arrived on the green, having taken 166 strokes on a four-stroke hole. She had perseverance, but to what end? [2 ¶s from “You Are Free to Fail” by David G. Rogne, www.Sermons.com.]

James McCormick tells about hearing a commercial for a savings and loan company one day in his car. “A man, obviously unschooled in the complexities of finance, was being interviewed. He was asked a lot of questions about stocks, bonds, various investments, trends, interest rates, and the tax implications of it all. Of course, he had no answers. He admitted that he was ignorant about all of that; that’s why he trusted the experts at the savings institution. Although he didn’t know the answers, he knew that they did. He trusted that his investment was in good hands there.

McCormick admits that he really wasn’t paying much attention to all of that, because up to that point it was a rather standard, predictable commercial. But then came the punch line, and it made him sit up and take notice. The zinger was this: “51% of smart is knowing what you are dumb at.” [2 ¶s adapted from “Weakness Into Strength” by James McCormick, www.Sermons.com.] I’m not sure that I would have phrased it exactly that way, but I remember receiving the same counsel in my pastoral care class. Know when you’re out of your depth; when people need professional care from a trained counselor. The first rule of pastoral care is the same rule that all care professionals follow: first, do no harm.

51% of smart is knowing what you're dumb at.

Now, the apostle Paul was no dummy. When it came to faith, he had real smarts, real ingenuity, and deep faith. And he knew how to call out a church that was out of its depth. He writes to the church in Corinth – a church he himself started – a church who didn't know what it was dumb at. They were starting to institute... well... I guess you'd call it a 'litmus test' of sorts. If you wanted to be a leader in the church, you needed some kind of dramatic religious experience. People started bragging, and pretty soon, they started wondering if Paul was legit, because he didn't seem to have shared his Damascus Road experience with the Corinthian church. To which Paul responds. In an adaptation of scripture called "The Message" Eugene Peterson interprets Paul's words here like this: "If I had a mind to brag a little, I could probably do it without looking ridiculous, and I'd still be speaking plain truth all the way. But I'll spare you. I don't want anyone imagining me as anything other than the fool you'd encounter if you saw me on the street or heard me talk." That's because Paul's overriding concern was not for his status, but for the unity and strength of the congregation.

"Paul knew, from experience, that boasting about spiritual superiority does not build up the faith of others. It does not lead others to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, but instead creates hard feelings and division. [2 ¶s adapted (significantly, in places) from "Strength Through Weakness" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] Rather, Paul realized that it is our humanness weaknesses that are so often the key. Our weaknesses make us aware of our need for God. And many times, those weaknesses may be the very thing that helps another see God in us.

This past Christmas, we went to see a movie together as a family when we were down visiting my brother in Florida, entitled "The Boys in the Boat". If you haven't seen it, stream it or rent it – it's a lovely film and so uplifting, which a lot of people seem to need right now. Based on the #1 New York Times bestselling non-fiction novel written by Daniel James Brown and directed by George Clooney, the film is about the 1936 University of Washington rowing team that competed for gold at the Summer Olympics in Berlin. This inspirational true story follows a group of underdogs at the height of the Great Depression. Nobody thought they could win. They had a fraction of the funding of the ivy league teams. The entire team was new to the sport – not a one of them had grown up rowing. Half of them are living in the cars or on the street. And yet, their weaknesses – their lack of training, their desperation for something better, their need to stay on the team just have meals – turned out to be their strength. They were hungry to learn, and they had nothing left but hope. They bond together and become unlikely underdogs that wind up giving hope to a whole nation emerging from the Great Depression.

Paul knew that sometimes the things that make us most human are the things that make the difference. And so rather than brag about his strengths, Paul talks about his weakness. We don't know what it is. He describes it as a thorn in his flesh. Exactly what that thorn was is anyone's guess. Scholars suggest everything from epilepsy to poor eyesight to some kind of speech impediment to an overbearing mother-in-law or severe criticism from former colleagues. Whatever it was, it caused a lot of pain and hardship. "Three times he prayed urgently that it might depart from him. But it never did. Whereupon he stopped praying for a once-and-for-all victory and began trying to discern whatever blessings there might be in the midst of his problem. [from "On Feeling Low in a High-Flying World" by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.]

And the blessings he found in the midst were, as best as I can tell, twofold. First, he found grace sufficient to his need. That's an interesting expression, if you really stop to think about it, because grace isn't exactly something one can quantify and count... is it? Grace is the character of God. We normally talk about it in relation to our sin. Grace is forgiveness, freedom, a fresh start. Given that all of us sin—all of us suffer broken relationships, utter hurtful things, participate in social constructs that oppress or belittle—grace is good news.

“Elie Wiesel once noted that according to Jewish tradition, creation did not end with humankind. It began with them. When God created humankind, God gave them a secret and that secret was not how to begin, but how to *begin again*. In other words, “it is not given to humanity to begin; that privilege is God’s alone. But it is given to humanity to begin again....” [from *Messengers Of God* (Random House, 1976); as used in “The Problem With Being A Perfect 10” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

What is true for individuals is true for churches, communities, institutions and nations. Grace is the freedom to begin again. It means we can change, we can do better, we can overcome, we can grow. It shouldn’t be frightening. It’s grace. But it is hard.

Which takes us to the blessing to be found in weakness. The fullest explanation of grace sufficient is not merely forgiveness, fresh starts, renewals or healing—vital as those are. The fullest explanation of grace sufficient is presence. God with us. Never was there a more profound example of God’s power being made perfect in weakness than in the birth of a helpless infant in a manger who would grow into a man willing to hang on a cross for my sake and yours. Weakness seems to bookend Jesus’ life, and yet, the enormous power of God is fully on display in the weakness of the One sent to be our Savior. In him, we discover and experience God With Us.

Bill Ritter puts it this way: “God never says: “Fight your way through the forest by yourself and I’ll meet you when you reach the glade.” God is there when the skies are dark, the trees are thick, and all the animals (real and imagined) have voracious appetites...

“But how do I make that real for us this morning? Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder, who serves a United Methodist Church out in the San Diego area, wrote a book entitled *In the Shadow of God’s Wings*. In it, she shares her struggle with clinical depression, and talks about one of her hospital stays. Her spiritual director paid her a visit, bringing Holy Communion with him. All of us know that the sacrament can be celebrated anywhere. But on this particular occasion, there was nothing in the bare-bones room... no cross ... no candles ... no altar ... not even a table. Looking around, they found a trashcan. After emptying its contents, they turned it upside down, transforming it into an altar.

“What a double-edged action. Would that we all could pitch the trash before lifting the cup. But pitch it, she did. And lift it, she did. There, with an upside-down wastebasket as an altar, Susan experienced God’s presence in one of the darkest and most difficult hours of her life.

“Once we concede that God can meet us anywhere, we open ourselves to the possibilities that God can heal us anywhere... Three prayers down, Paul stopped praying for a once-and-for-all victory and began trying to discern whatever blessings there might be in the midst of his problem.” [3 ¶s adapted from “On Feeling Low in a High-Flying World” by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.]

And we would do well to do likewise. Many of you know that my mother fought cancer for about 10 years. Three bouts with it. The first time cancer reared its head, she was terrified. People rallied around her, they prayed, they brought meals, they sat with her during treatments, and eventually, it went into remission, and she began to feel more like her old self. But she found that people were reluctant to ask for her help at Sunday School or at a march in Lansing or to serve meals in Detroit because they didn’t want to give her more than she could handle. And although she knew that came from a place of love and was very gracious about it, she resented it deeply. She didn’t want other people making her choices for her. So when the cancer came back a few years later, she became very private about it. She limited who could know about it to a very tight inner circle, which helped her maintain control of her life, but made it hard, particularly for my dad, who really needed to be able to talk to someone other than mom for support. Eventually, it went into remission again and she had a few more good years. When the cancer returned a third time in February of 2016, it became clear pretty quickly that it wasn’t going to get better this time. Brad and I accepted this appointment in Saginaw in part, to be closer to our parents, given what they were facing. My mother had been a teacher, a leader, a pastor’s wife, a mission guru. She had always had a heart for people. And throughout that summer, my mother struggled, not only with cancer, but with the fact that she was no longer the caregiver; that she was now the one who had to let others care for her. She wasn’t comfortable in that role.

But sometime early that fall, mom had an epiphany, of sorts. She sat down with dad, and my brothers, and me, and acknowledged that this was her new reality. She was dying, and with the time she had left, she wanted to just enjoy each other's company. She checked herself into hospice care, leaving the day-to-day personal care to "the professionals" and leaving us free to be together. We played games and reminisced and had some pretty intense heart-to-hearts. From a place of profound weakness and vulnerability, mom became a powerhouse, become the caregiver in the only way left to her. She said the things that needed to be said – words of deep affection and gratitude and affirmation that were so uncomfortable to hear in the moment because they were so raw, and yet, have proven to be an invaluable gift to me in these years since her passing. She made her peace with what wasn't finished; and with the weddings and graduations and milestones that she would not see from this side of death. She anchored herself in the faith that had carried her this far already. I have seen many people face cancer with great courage and strength. I count my mother among the bravest. In the end, she knew what mattered. And when she was weak, that's when she grew strong.

Friends, we as individuals, as a church, as a nation, face problems that can be vast, complex, troubling, and overwhelming. And sometimes things seem so much worse than they've ever been. But God is bigger. God is present. God is powerful, more so when we acknowledge our weaknesses and our need. God is working. The blood that unites us is stronger than anything that might try to divide us. And God's grace is enough to turn the trash bins of this world into the altars of communion, understanding, peace, grace, undying love, and unimaginable strength. Thanks be to God. Amen.