

**WEAKNESS: A Path to Strength**  
**2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6: 1-13**  
**A sermon by Mel Williams**  
**Duke Chapel - July 5, 2009**

*“I will boast of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me...For whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” - 2 Corinthians 12:9-10*

The text for today prompts me to say a word about weakness—as a path to strength. In our culture weakness is anathema; it’s to be discouraged and even joked about. Some of you old timers will remember newspaper ads from an earlier generation with the script “I was a 97 pound weakling, but then I found the Charles Atlas Bodybuilding Course, and look at me now.” Weakness—being a weakling--- is to be avoided at all cost.

But there is some good news in weakness. In his recent book *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Peter Gomes tells of going to England where he worshipped at the church in Windsor where the royal family worships. On this occasion following the service Peter met the Queen Mother, who at the time was 102. She commented to Peter on what a fine sermon the pastor gave, and then she said, with a twinkle in her eyes, “I do like a bit of good news on Sunday, don’t you?”

What’s the good news about weakness? We’re more likely to see weakness as bad news. We don’t like to focus on our weakness; we prefer to talk about our strengths. In our culture we have a fixation with being strong. When you go for a job interview, employers want to hear about your strengths, not your weaknesses. Keep your weaknesses under wraps. Dismiss them, minimize them, try to make them go away.

But weakness is standard equipment on every model of human being or society. We’re familiar with our weaknesses: fear, selfishness, judgmentalism, temptation, depression, disorganization, low self-esteem. We may even think that the world revolves around me, my, and mine. I have a friend who says, “Mel, I’m tired of talking about me. Let’s talk about you. What do you think of me?” Ego can get in the way, and pride can turn our strengths into arrogance. That’s true for us as individuals--- and as a nation.

Yesterday was July 4, our country's birthday, so it seems appropriate that we take a moment to acknowledge this event. Join me in singing the first verse of "America the Beautiful." "O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain. For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain. America, America, God shed his grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea." But do you remember the second stanza? "America, America, God, mend thine every flaw..." (words by Katherine Bates)

"God, mend thine every flaw." It's a prayer, and it's one piece of Americana that is truthful; we as a nation have flaws. We're not made up only of military might and political power. We have flaws that need to be mended. We have weaknesses—a faltering economy, a health insurance system that's broken, 500,000 people in NC alone who have lost jobs in the economic slump. We are still fighting wars in two countries when we now know that going into Iraq was a terrible mistake, costing 4300 American lives, an estimated one million Iraqi lives, and untold displacement and suffering, plus three trillion American dollars. (from Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz, "The US in Iraq: An audit of the pain after six years," Durham Herald Sun, July 4, 2009)

At the same time we have nearly 40 million Americans living in poverty. We as a nation have our weaknesses, our deficiencies; yet we prefer to call ourselves the most powerful nation on earth. Patriotism can easily drift into pride, and pride is a failure to accept our weakness, our limitations. When we are puffed up with pride, we have trouble with the truth that life means limitation.

Jesus talked about the dangers of pride in a parable when he described the Pharisee, beating his chest, praying "I thank thee that I'm not like other people...I fast twice a week, I give tithes." (Luke 18:12)

By contrast, in our text for today, Paul says, "I boast of my weaknesses." Paul is not saying he's a 97 pound weakling and proud of it; but he's giving us a crucial insight into faith. He's saying that his weaknesses are an important part of his faith. Paul had plenty of ego strength. At times he almost swaggers with self-confidence. He was obviously enormously talented as a leader, theologian, and writer.

But he says “To keep me from being too elated [prideful, arrogant], a thorn in the flesh was given to me.” We’ve long wondered what exactly was Paul’s “thorn in the flesh.” It was surely more than a tiny splinter stuck in his little finger. The meaning of the word “thorn” is closer to a stake, driven into his body in pain. Was it depression or epilepsy or headaches?

Whatever his ailment, it lingered with him, and Paul prayed over and over for God to take it away. Instead, God gave Paul the strength to bear his pain. “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” It’s a paradox of faith: “When I am weak, then I am strong.” Whatever limitation Paul faced, his weakness helped him rely in a deep way not on himself but on God. He began to see his weakness as a pathway to God’s grace.

One of the central prayers of the Psalms is “Create in me a clean heart, O God.” (Psalm 51) That prayer comes from the experience of being dirtied, humiliated, disappointed--- weak. (Dorothee Soelle, p. 91, *The Strength of the Weak*)

Like the prayers of the Psalmist, we often pray from our weakness. At the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC, Killian Noe was one of the founders of Samaritan Inn, a drug and alcohol treatment center, which started as a mission group of the Church of the Saviour. Killian and other members of the church had brought a lawsuit against the City of Washington for discrimination in housing, when the city tried to block people with addictions from living in one of the church’s buildings.

Gordon Cosby, the pastor, came to the trial to pray and offer encouragement. He spoke to Killian who had been in the court room for days. At a break he asked her, “How are you holding up through this stressful trial?” She said she was tempted to give the usual superficial response like, “Fine, thanks for asking.” But she decided to be honest. She said, “Gordon, I have never felt more profoundly inadequate.” Gordon said, “Good,” and then he quickly added, “Because when we really get in touch with our powerlessness and our profound inadequacy, then God can use us.” (Killian Noe, p. 78 *Finding Our Way Home*)

Bill Coffin, my chaplain during days at Yale Divinity School, said that once when the bottom dropped out of his life, he went to see a friend who was a wonderful counselor. He said, “I’m feeling miserable!” The counselor

said, “Good----can you stay with the feeling?” Coffin said, “I thought I had come for comfort. He thought I had come for greater honesty, no matter what the pain in attaining it.” The friend said “If you’re disillusioned, it’s your fault for having illusions in the first place.” He even pulled out one of those tea bags with a saying on it. He said, “I carry this around for people like you.” It read, “Don’t complain about the way the ball bounces if you are the one who dropped the ball.” Coffin said, “I swore at him, but I was deeply grateful. He was a true friend, one who risks his friendship for the sake of his friend.” (from p. 127, *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, Jr., volume 1*)

Power is made perfect in weakness, the Scripture says. As a nation and as individuals, we find our inner authority, our spiritual center, only when we face our weaknesses. Theology originates in pain, said the German theologian Dorothee Soelle. (*The Strength of the Weak*). Likewise, faith means daring to love; and faith originates not from loveless power, but from powerless love.

That’s why Jesus was always hanging out with powerless people---those who were hurting and oppressed. His mission was to invite weak and wounded people, ordinary people, to enter the Kingdom, the Beloved Community of love, forgiveness, justice, and restored life. But his starting point was weakness.

Jesus’ own life was filled with weakness. In the Gospel lesson today Jesus is rejected by his own relatives. They took offense at him: “Is this Joseph’s son?” And the text says, “He could do no deed of power there, except he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” (Mark 6:5) Even as he was being rejected by his own people, he found some power in his weakness. He found that when he was weak, God’s grace came pouring into him and through him.

The next scene in Mark’s Gospel has Jesus sending his twelve disciples two by two to announce that the Kingdom is here—the God Movement is here, as Clarence Jordan called it. But if Jesus is the initiator, the catalyst, of the God Movement, it seems that he’s choosing a rather weak way of getting the word out. Why not send thousands, not 12? But he sends two at a time. “Take nothing with you--- no food, no money, no traveling bag.” What a weak way to start a movement! He tells them to go to various houses. “If they don’t welcome you, shake the dust off your feet and keep moving.” In

other words, your mission is an act of faith, and you will be given what you need when you need it.

In some churches, I'm told that when a minister or priest is ordained, the question asked is not "Are you strong enough to be a minister," but "Are you weak enough to be a priest? Are you weak enough to be a minister? Are you weak enough to follow Jesus?"

Jesus focused first on people who are weak. He was in the business of transforming weakness into strength. The question for us is whether we will allow God to turn our weakness into God's strength.

Pain can become a source of healing; and some of us grow strong at the broken places," as Hemingway wrote. That means we can become, in Henri Nouwen's term, "wounded healers." We can allow our pain to widen our sensitivity to others; we can allow our pain to connect us to the suffering of others and to activate our compassion.

The central symbol of Christian faith is a cross—a symbol of weakness and defeat. But God turns the cross into a symbol of love--- strength in weakness.

In our nation, God is in the business of mending our every flaw. God is in the business of turning our personal defeats into victories, our disappointments into hope. But the first step is to trust that God will help us deepen our weakness until that weakness becomes a path to God's strength. Then, impossible things can happen. By God's grace, our weakness can become a balm in Gilead, a healing force, to make other wounded people whole.

This is the good news of weakness, and it's such good news we can sing it: There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged. Sometimes my work's in vain.  
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again. Chorus.

Amen. So may it be.

