

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“The Upside of Weakness”
II Corinthians 12:1-10

In these weeks, we’re talking about things in our lives that hold us back from fellowship (at the heart of the Christian life) fellowship with God, and with each other; things that keep us from being REAL. Isn’t it true that our struggles, our weaknesses, often do that?

Author Dan Schaeffer in his book, The Power of Weakness* tells the story of a ten-year-old boy named Mark who decided to study judo despite the fact that he had lost his left arm in an automobile accident. Mark began his lessons with a Japanese judo master and was doing well, but after three months had passed and he had only been taught one move, he questioned the master. “This is the only move you’ll ever need to know,” was the master’s reply.

Perplexed, but trusting, Mark kept training, and several months later entered his first tournament. Surprising himself, Mark won the first two matches. The third match was more difficult, but Mark deftly used his one lone move to win the match.

He was now in the finals, but this time his opponent was much larger, stronger and more experienced, against Mark, *with his missing left arm*. Mark was nervous, and it was showing in the match, and the referee was about to call a time out when the master intervened and said, “Let him continue.” The match resumed and Mark’s opponent made a critical mistake: he dropped his guard. Instantly, Mark used his move to pin his opponent, winning the match and the tournament.

On the way home, Mark reviewed all his matches and moves with his master, finally summoning the courage to ask the question that was foremost on his mind. “How did I win the tournament with only one move?” “You won for two reasons,” the judo master answered. “First, you’ve almost mastered one of the most difficult throws in all judo. And second, the only known defense for that move is for your opponent to grab your left arm.” Mark’s weakness had become a strength ... so with the Apostle Paul, and so with us.

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Lord, help us to know, through your very Word, what a good God you are.

Paul Becomes VERY REAL with this Corinthian church, which he founded on his second missionary journey. Eighteen months after he left, the church began to struggle with divisiveness, back-sliding, a contesting (by his opponents) of Paul’s authority and leadership. Paul writes these letters of Corinthians as a pastor concerned for the flock. Here, he speaks openly of two things.

This amazing vision of being caught up into heaven, so mysterious and glorious was his experience that he describes it in third person; a vision that could prove his leadership, quiet his opponents, be something to BOAST about, his closeness to God.

And right after sharing this mountain-top experience, he speaks about a thorn a humiliating, painful weakness in his life. WHY would he admit to that, Paul, their leader, their example, brilliant, self-reliant? He tells them, “Three times I begged Lord to take it away.”

We don’t know what that thorn was. Paul describes it as a messenger of Satan (we might think of “Job” in the Old Testament), a thorn sent by Satan, but allowed by God to keep Paul from being too PROUD.

There are hints from other parts of Scripture, that it was a physical suffering, a recurrent, painful, condition, perhaps related to his eyes that made it difficult for others to look at him, that no doubt affected his work. Such that he asked God three different times to REMOVE it. And in the midst of all Paul’s powerful prayers in Scripture that were answered YES, this one, *for him* personally, was a NO. “My Grace is enough for you; my **Grace** is enough for you.”

I asked a number of you if you have any weaknesses. Someone answered, “candy bars;” for others of you chocolate, for me, tortilla chips, my weakness. But Paul, in his sharing of the thorn, is clearly talking about something very painful. The word in Greek “Stake,” metal stake. It was something he didn’t fully describe.

So also for us, in our lives, we may not even have words for it, but it is there; sorrows, aspects of ourselves (physically, circumstantially), things we wish were NOT a part of us and we would give anything for them to GO AWAY. Not something we talk about often, or acknowledge before others.

My Dad was kind of like an Apostle Paul to me, spiritual father, with such a rich life. He lived with a bad back, but something else he didn’t talk much about it, a kind of existential loneliness, especially in his early adulthood, later years, surrounded as he was by a loving marriage, colleagues and friends, a wondrous ministry, and a pretty good daughter, still a kind of loneliness in the midst.

Author Henry Nouwen says that loneliness is a gift that reminds us of our deepest need for God. I myself have experienced what my Dad did at times, a loneliness, a kind of thorn. By myself, it’s hard; In God’s hands, holy. God says “My grace is enough” and not only that but “My power is made perfect in your weakness.” “My strength comes into its own in your weakness.” The very GOSPEL of Jesus Christ is the story of that.

Paul writes to the church to consider your call; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, so that no person might boast in the presence of God. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent POWER belongs to God and not to us. God chooses weakness!

Perhaps there is something in your life (like mine) that is HARD, that we think holds us back and yet we can see it in a new light, the light of God’s GRACE; the promise that God will DO something with it, in it, through it, in us precisely because it is weak. And like the little boy in judo learned, there is ONE needed move – to Trust, the Master.

Many of you have heard of Corrie Ten Boom, who survived concentration camp. She learned to trust and to surrender her ALL to Jesus. Another survivor of hardship, of an accident in her youth, Joni Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic, writes about her encounter over lunch with Corrie.

“I relive each moment of my visit with Corrie Ten Boom (who by that time was in her 80’s, paralyzed by a stroke). I recall how our eyes met as we were fed our cucumber sandwiches. Helpless and for the most part dependent, I felt our **mutual weakness**. Yet I am certain neither of us had ever felt stronger.”

It makes me think of the **cross of Christ** – a symbol of weakness and humiliation, yet at the same time, a symbol of victory and strength.

For a wheelchair may confine a body. But no wheelchair can confine the soul, the soul that is inwardly renewed day by day. For paralyzed people walk with the Lord. Speechless people can talk with the Almighty. Sightless people can see Jesus. Deaf people can hear the Word of God. And those like Tante Corrie, their minds shadowy and obscure, can have the very mind of Christ, in the power of God, His Spirit, who heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds, who determines the number of the stars and gives to all their names, whose delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor the speed of a runner but who takes pleasure in those who fear him, who hope in his steadfast love.

When we are real with God (with our weaknesses and needs), when we are real with someone else who also is REAL, more of God can be seen. You know that, we know that. Let’s live there! A couple of words kept floating into my mind, Weakness Makes Room for Wonder.

Our Strengths, oh they are good, but when they are all about US, I think there is little room for God. There’s plenty of room for God when we know we have to depend on him. And God does something wondrous, that wouldn’t happen without that weakness, yielding.

Weakness Makes Room for Wonder, indeed. Paul writes, “Therefore I am content with hardships, sufferings that the power of Christ may dwell in me, for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Let us now offer a struggle, a weakness in our own life, to our Mighty Lord. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

- The Power of Weakness, by Dan Schaeffer, Discovery House, 2014
(the title “The Upside of Weakness” are also Schaeffer’s words)