

The Appeal of Weakness
Mark 6:1-13 and 2 Corinthians 12:2-10
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Weakness is not very appealing. At least it wasn't to the captains of the fifth grade kickball teams who regularly chose me only when all of the other less weak options were gone, or my eighth grade gym teacher who scoffed at my efforts in the weight room. Weakness is not appealing in politicians who fall from grace, whether by giving into the temptations of marital infidelity or political kickbacks. Weakness is not appealing in governments resorting to violence when challenged by shouts from the rooftops, or husbands when challenged by their wives. Weakness is not appealing in passed-out drunks and drug addicts lying on cardboard boxes in broad daylight. Babies get a pass because their weakness is an unavoidable consequence of their helplessness, but the rest of us are usually presumed to be physically, morally, or spiritually responsible for our weakness, and therefore open for criticism, discrimination, gossip, or pity. Fairly or unfairly, we are generally unappealing when we are weak, whether victims of nature, our own misdeeds, or the misdeeds of others.

Thank goodness, then, that we were made in God's image and not the other way around, or our God might find us as unappealing as we find ourselves and one another. But our God is a little smarter than us, and can not only see past our weakness, but love us in spite of it, and even encourage us to be weak. At least that

is what the Apostle Paul is telling the Corinthian church. “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” There are many passages within Scripture itself that sum up well the message of the Bible, but this is surely one of the best. “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” These are not words from a modern-day Biblical commentator. These are words from God’s own mouth to Paul’s ears, and powerful words, the kind which must have stopped the Corinthians in their tracks from following other so-called Apostles and super Apostles who had been making their case to Paul’s people.

It was, you see, certain false Apostles, and super Apostles who had been criticizing Paul, or at least the teaching of Christ he represented, as weak. And the Corinthian church was beginning to find Paul and his brand of Christianity more and more unappealing, as we have learned that weakness is not very appealing. In the preceding chapters of Second Corinthians we learn of this battle for the hearts and minds of the Corinthians, how Paul must defend his ministry against charges that he isn’t a very good public speaker, that his bodily presence is weak, that he was “acting according to human standards,” perhaps code words for his embrace of a Christian spirituality that did not reject the bodily existence both we and Jesus share. You see, there were those who believed that God could not possibly have been so weak as to come to earth as a mere human being, that a spiritual being so great would not have soiled itself to come from heaven to our messy earth. Paul’s Christ, however, was that child born in a stable, that Savior crucified on a cross,

and so they criticized him for presenting an inferior, worldly Christ. In an extended argument against these opponents, Paul returns again and again to this theme of weakness, mocking the super Apostles and accepting their claim of weakness to show that he is the one with the true message of God. “You want to talk about weak? I’ll show you weak!” he is saying, for he knows that it was precisely the weakness of human beings that God used to demonstrate God’s very own strength. We need look no further than the cross and the weakness of those who put Jesus there, the weakness of Jesus’ own human flesh, and the weakness of those who abandoned him for fear of their lives, to see the truth of God’s message to Paul that “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Out of all that weakness surrounding Jesus came the power to overcome death and transform every weak human heart and every weak human institution into vessels to carry the power of grace into the world.

And so we hear Paul mocking those super Apostles as he speaks about himself in the third person as he describes a man filled with the power of God to see into heaven itself: “I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven...and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.” Everyone will know he is referring to himself, but he is keeping from going over the top like his opponents by speaking about himself sideways like this. By revealing these visions and revelations, he is showing the Corinthians that he does indeed have access to great spiritual power, but that the

power belongs not to him, but rightfully to God. In fact, Paul is so close to God that Satan must do everything possible to keep Paul's spiritual power in check, and so we hear about the "thorn" that was given to him to keep him from being, as he says, "too elated" in his visions and revelations. We never learn exactly what this thorn is, and scholars have debated endlessly about whether it was a physical ailment or a mental infirmity, but none of that really matters. What is important is that Paul asked for God to take it away, and finding his request denied, went ahead with his life anyway, content with the answer he received, that "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." In the end, Paul, for all his spiritual power, is willing to submit to the God who has given him that power, rather than using it for his own personal gain, or giving up for all the challenges it brings from the Satan who finds him a threat. "Therefore," he says, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

I started out by saying that weakness is not very appealing, and you may have noticed that I used some examples which might not seem to apply when we are talking about the kind of weakness through which God's power is demonstrated. The weaknesses Paul seems to be talking about are not personal moral failures, or uncontrollable anger, or addiction, though I am sure Paul would agree that God can also work through those kind of weaknesses to bring some good into those situations and the world. No, the weaknesses to which Paul is

referring are those external to us, those challenges or victimizations we face that are beyond our control: the illnesses, the tragedies, the conditions of our genes, the scheming of others, whether they are friend, foe, or Satan. And if that weren't enough, I believe he is referring especially to those challenges which come to us specifically as a result of our efforts on behalf of the Gospel, for that seems to be what is behind both the thorn he has received from the messenger of Satan, as well as that list of things he is content to endure for the sake of the Gospel.

Before I conclude tonight with a few words on both the passive and active aspects of weakness, I want to say something briefly about the word "perfect" in the context of this passage. "Power is made *perfect* in weakness," God says to Paul. Throughout Scripture, and here in Paul's letter, the word "perfect" means more than the idea of something unblemished or pure. Rather, it comes from a Greek word describing something complete, or coming to fullness, or being maximized. That "perfect" is not a static condition to which we aspire, but a dynamic experience through which we are moving, suggests something about our weakness as well: that the weaker we are, the stronger God's power. It is not then that we should simply accept the weakness we experience in ourselves, or that comes our way, but rather to seek to become weaker and weaker; to find ways of maximizing our weaknesses. Of course, that sounds a little strange, doesn't it; maximizing our weaknesses, but hey, the Gospel is paradoxical if nothing else! We are extolled to weakness but know that we are called to be strong in our faith and

witness. We are told that God's power is made perfect in weakness, but we are to strengthen one another, to build one another up, in Jesus Christ. As puzzling as it sounds, it's one of those things we accept as an article of faith.

This biblical understanding of perfection as a process has a lot to do with how we might think about cultivating our weakness, both passively and actively. In perhaps most cases where we find weakness unappealing, it is because the weakling does not possess the characteristics of the traditional understanding of perfection. On that fifth grade playground, I was a runty little kid, far from perfection as a physical specimen, and others knew it. But what they may not have known was that God was perfecting me, bringing me to completion, in my less-than-perfect condition. I became a very different person, hopefully the person God wanted me to be, precisely because I wasn't picked first from among the other kids. And so, years later, I know perhaps a little more keenly than those picked first what it means to be vulnerable. I give thanks that the supportive people around me in those days encouraged me in appropriate ways, so that I did not spend my childhood resentful or trying vainly to prove something inconsequential. Rather, they encouraged me into an acceptance of my limitations which has served me well in the Kingdom, if not on the playground, as I cooperated with the weakness I inherited, rather than rebelling against it. Don't get me wrong; there are things worth struggling against and overcoming, but we are wise to pick and choose our battles, lest all we do is spend our lives battling in vain.

We are well served too by actively taking on our weaknesses by examining those sensitive places in our lives and taking a step back from the inappropriate gratification we get from the strength we experience. You see, we are frequently at our most vulnerable when we feel we are at our strongest. We become so sure of ourselves that we let down our guard. At the height of our success or our happiness, we suddenly find ourselves tested, and found wanting, tempted and falling faster than we ever could have expected. Perhaps some of you have seen the film “The Devil Wears Prada,” a film well named for today’s text, but also an age old story. The main character, a capable, but fashion-flawed young secretary, manages to catch on as the assistant to the high-powered and demanding editor of the most prestigious fashion magazine. As the movie progresses, we see this character trading in, little by little, her values and her identity, for the strokes she receives for doing well in the eyes of her boss. Even as she works her way up the corporate ladder, she begins rejecting friends and loved ones, betraying colleagues, and turning into the boss she both wants to please and pity. Not surprisingly, by the end of the movie, she realizes what she is becoming and backs away, painfully reclaiming that critical part of herself that she has sacrificed along the way.

I probably won’t be telling you anything you don’t already know by reminding you that each of you have at least one area in your life where you are tempted to reach out for the gratification offered by strength real or imagined. It is very attractive and very seductive. It may be pleasing your boss or spouse or

children by becoming what they want you to be. It may be rising to the top of your profession by working yourself beyond the limits of your body. It may be pledging your allegiance to something of more economic, but less enduring, value than the Gospel. But to try to take hold of what this kind of strength offers comes at the expense of the weakness to which God is calling you, and the grace which we have learned, is far more powerful and sufficient than anything strength has to offer.

Tonight as we share together the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we have the chance to focus in on the perfected weakness of our Savior. In this Sacrament, we recall the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus, perhaps the ultimate signs of weakness a human can represent. But we also recall what God did with that weakness, and celebrate that we are here tonight precisely because of it. And so, I would like to invite you tonight, during our time of communion, to give some thought to where in your life a little more weakness would be a good thing. And know that in embracing that weakness, you are in the strong hands of one whose grace is sufficient, and who takes your weakness and makes it the most powerful force in the world. Amen.