

“Power in Weakness”¹
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Andrew Foster Connors
7th Sunday after Pentecost
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Someone said to me recently “I know this is terrible theology, but what do you think God is trying to teach us through the current political climate?” It was a good question not because I think God send misfortune on people – we have taken care of that ourselves. No, it’s a good question because there is always plenty to learn in the midst of the turmoil – plenty to learn about ourselves and plenty to learn about God.

One of those lessons of late is that desperation drives some of us to a much greater awareness of our need. And, a greater awareness of our need can open us to a greater reliance on God’s grace. This is true of every major character in the biblical text. From Adam and Even, naked and ashamed in the garden, to Abraham and Sarah’s many missteps in pursuit of their dream of a child, to Moses’ realization that he doesn’t have what it takes to lead, to Mary’s words to the angel in learning about the child is to bear: “How can this be?” There is no character in the Bible who is completely self-reliant, without need. Even Jesus asks for relief from the cup of suffering and cries out from the cross.

It’s also true of many of our more contemporary heroes in the faith – from Dr. King to Mother Theresa just to name two. And it’s true of countless experiences of people in this congregation. It’s no coincidence that people who have been through AA, or survived cancer, or relinquished someone to death, on the whole seem to have easier access to spiritual awareness or awakening. Desperation drives some of us to a greater awareness of our need. An awareness of our need opens us to a greater consciousness of God’s grace.

You would think, then, that we would have less difficulty than we do in facing those times in our lives or in our history when the future is bleak, when it’s clear that we don’t have the resources or the power or the control that we need to master the challenges we face in our lives, in our community, in our world.

But then again, for WEIRD people like us, need feels especially threatening. WEIRD is an acronym that stands for Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic culture. In 2010 several psychology researchers published an article pointing out that nearly all research in psychology is conducted on a very small subset of the human population: people from WEIRD cultures. This is a problem, these researchers pointed out, since WEIRD people are statistical outliers. As Jonathan Haidt, the author of the book that reading many of us will discuss in a couple of weeks, writes, people from western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic cultures are the least typical, least representative people you could study if you want to make generalizations about human nature. You can summarize

¹ This sermon was informed heavily by a paper written by the Rev. Heather Shortlidge for use in our preaching group, *The Well*.

what's weird about WEIRD culture, Haidt writes, with this simple statement: "the WEIRDer you are, the more you see a world full of separate objects, rather than relationships."² WEIRD societies produce ethics that are strong on autonomy but can be weak on community.

And maybe that's what makes Paul's argument about power in weakness so much more difficult for Westerners like most of us to accept or even understand. For people trained in a culture that virtually equates autonomy with God, need is the opposite of power. But for people who believe that power comes through relationship, our weakness is the best place to experience the power of God's love.

Paul seems to have mastered this openness to need but only over time, through his own wrestling with some unspecified "thorn in the flesh." We don't know what that deficiency was. Some speculate that Paul had psychological challenges, others sexual temptations, still others a guilty conscience, feelings of inadequate success, or a physical illness or disability. What we know is that this thorn in the flesh was so severe that he begged God to remove it on three separate occasions.

Yet over time, Paul concludes that his own need is not a deficiency to be overcome. It is the place where God's grace is more accessible. Rather than fear this thorn in the flesh, Paul chooses to celebrate it. Knowing that we need God and cannot make it on our own is actually a position of strength, says Paul, rather than weakness. Knowing that God is much stronger than any strength we can muster up on our own is, paradoxically, the way to access this greater power.

The essayist Clifton Fadiman found that greater power but only after losing almost everything. In the latter years of his life, he developed extreme vision loss that was so debilitating and frightening to imagine, that he begged his daughter to help him end his life. She urged him to at least try to adapt to what was happening to him. He finally agreed to attend a program that taught independent living skills to adults experiencing full or partial blindness. The program was far from easy for him, but he found himself enthralled with many innovations he learned for navigating the world from this new, unknown perspective. He learned to fold paper money in particular ways so he could tell them apart. He learned to open milk cartons, and cook.

His daughter, who wrote about this experience, recalls the phone call she received after his first lesson. Her father, who had already led a life not without extraordinary people and ideas, remarked, "That may have been the most interesting day of my life... Except for the first day of my life, it was the most novel."

MaryAnn McKibben Dana who wrote about this story in her blog, shared this story along with a quote that continues to inform and challenge her. "Replace fear of the unknown with curiosity." That's where the promise of transformation seems to

² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, (New York: Vintage Books), 2012, p. 113. Haidt gives a number of examples include one study where participants are asked to write twenty statements beginning with the words "I am. . ." "Americans are likely to list their own internal psychological characteristics (happy, outgoing, interested in jazz), whereas East Asians are more likely to list their roles and relationships (a son, a husband, an employee of Fujitsu)."

lie. That place where our deficiencies uncover our need – the place where a different kind of holy power is found. “Life offers us countless opportunities to move from fear to curiosity”, MaryAnn writes. “Many of these opportunities are much less dramatic than the one facing Clifton Fadiman. Yet they hold the potential for transformation nonetheless.”³

Of course that’s not what most people in our culture believe. Nietzsche spoke for many people when he critiqued the Christian strength in weakness argument. “How typical of those Christians, especially the clergy. They are weak and cannot be anything but weaklings. So they make a virtue out of necessity, constructing a moral system that glorifies weakness in order to exert their will to power over the truly strong and virtuous.”⁴

Taking Nietzsche seriously, it’s true that Christians can and sometimes do spiritualize our strength with these “weakness arguments.” Strength in weakness isn’t going to help the immigrants in our country vulnerable to the street violence in their home country, vulnerable to the institutional violence in our own. Strength in weakness isn’t going to address the racial bias present in all of us that becomes exceptionally dangerous in encounters between the police and African-Americans in our country. Strength in weakness doesn’t stop shooters who want to kill, doesn’t bring jobs to people hungry for work, doesn’t bring funding to schools that need it. Strength in weakness isn’t going to work for God’s vision of the world if by strength in weakness we mean running from power instead of harnessing it for change, or choosing laziness as a spiritual discipline, or disengaging from the world because it’s easier to be numb than it is to grieve.

But Paul’s isn’t arguing against power for people who need it. He’s appealing to the Corinthians to see that holy power arrives not through mastery or control, but as a gift. For people who think they have everything they already need, it’s hard to receive any gift which means that it’s hard to know the power that God offers to people at the point where our own faculties fail us.

Two things to keep in mind going forward. Paul’s transformation is a process. We speak much of his conversion on the road to Damascus – when he saw the light and his life was transformed, yes. But we speak less of his ongoing conversion – the process of integrating this transformation into his life – that place where many more of us live today. Paul asked God to remove his thorn in the flesh three times. Grief, despair, fear – this is all part of the journey. Second, grief is not the opposite of faith. It may well be an entry point to the power of weakness. Walter Brueggemann writes, “Grief is an element of aliveness and the answer to the denial the market demands of us. It is an index of our humanity. It is proof of the

³ MaryAnn McKibben Dana, “Reframing Fear,” July 3, 2018, <https://www.maryannmckibbendana.net/mamdblog/2018/7/3/reframing-fear>.

⁴ I mistakenly attributed this quote to Nietzsche. It was actually written by J. Warren Smith as a summary of Nietzsche’s argument in *The Antichrist*, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/weakness-virtue-virtue-weakness> A sampling of Nietzsche’s writings, translated by H.L. Mencken: “What is evil? – whatever springs from weakness. . . What is more harmful than any vice?—Practical sympathy for the botched and the weak—Christianity....” (Chapter 2).

presence of our relatedness to each other. It is a communal practice that recognizes that choosing the wilderness of vulnerability, mystery, and anxiety was a good and life-affirming choice.”⁵ People coming to terms with weakness need spaces to grieve. We provide that for each other.

I don't believe that God sends misfortune on us in order for us to learn. But that doesn't mean there aren't lessons to be learned about God in the midst of misfortune. Paul received from a vision in his own time of weakness – “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” It was a vision that had so transformed him that he wanted the fledgling church to know it for themselves. The power of God is sometimes seen more clearly in times of adversity when our reliance on other powers, assumptions, or things we take for granted fall flat. Paul found that power - power that gave him strength to resist a global empire unlike any the world had ever seen, knowing that what God was building – a community of love, of justice, of grace – was a better future. May it be so.

⁵ The quote is actually from a book written by Peter Block, Walter Brueggemann, and John McKnight, *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture* (New Jersey: Wiley), 2017 pp. 19-20.