

# WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/JULY 5, 2009

## WEAKNESS/2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10

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**I. THE TEXT:** Our lectionary text takes us to the church in Corinth. Paul is out of town and a handful of religious charlatans have arrived. Hoping to get the members of the Corinth congregation to abandon Jesus Christ and take up with their particular version of dealing with the deities, they go on the attack... “Paul is an inferior, mediocre, second-rate apostle – you can do a whole lot better,” they say. So Paul writes the Corinth Church to defend his ministry. “Here’s why you should stick with me,” he writes. But Paul’s defense an odd one – “stick with me because I am weak.” Hmm... **his** marketing agent ought to be fired. Why choose weakness as a selling point for the Christian faith? Hear the word of God through the words of Paul...

*It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2I 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. 3And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—<sup>4</sup>was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. <sup>5</sup>On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup>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, <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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. PRAYER:** Good and gracious God, sometimes we come hoping for some new truth when all we really need is for the old truth to fall freshly on our souls. And so we ask that you would now illumine this, your ancient truth, with the light of your Holy Spirit. Grant us open ears, open hearts, open minds, open hands. Amen.

### III. THE WORD WE WANT

Weakness – what a downer. Why couldn’t this morning’s text be a bit more upbeat – it’s the 4<sup>th</sup> of July for goodness sake – how about some rockets’ red glare, bombs bursting in air? What we get today is the word weakness. Now televangelists, they have some great words – *Winning in Life... the Mighty Warriors Intercessory Army... Fearless Victory in Jesus... Called to Conquer... Mighty Miracle Crusade... Answered Prayer Guaranteed.* [Not making up.] Now those are some fine words – strong words. And all Paul and we can come up with is the pitiful word *weakness* – what sort of word is that? And, I’m not all that fond of this morning’s text. The text I’d prefer to read would go something like this – Paul would have written... “I had this nasty

thorn in my flesh and I prayed one of my patented *guaranteed prayers* and the next morning, “poof” that old thorn was gone and I was good as new. As a member of the *Mighty Warriors Intercessory Army*, life with Jesus has been one *mighty miracle crusade* after another – no struggles, no stress – *just fearless victory in Jesus*. Let me tell you, I am *winning in life*. I just keep getting better and better – I am not just strong, I am really strong.”

But the text we’d prefer is not the text we get. Paul writes, I asked God to remove this awful thorn and God said “No. My grace is enough, Paul – my strength comes into its own in your weakness.”

There it is – weakness. We all have them – weaknesses – though we work hard to conceal them. Secret faults, hidden fears, deficiencies of every sort, chunks of our lives a mess, thorns large and small that we don’t want anyone else to see... real Christians are supposed to be strong, not weak. At some level it is our belief, isn’t it, that our faith is supposed to fix the weak parts, prevent the bad stuff and correct our most glaring deficiencies? The Christian life often portrayed on TV is the promise of perpetual happiness, a better and better you – one mighty miracle after another on our way to perfection. But that is not my experience – I find myself muddling around in the same gunk I’ve muddled around in for a lifetime. Yes, I’ve grown over the years and I’m sure you have too. But I – and most people I know – just won’t be thorn free. It’s not so simple as “*Ten Steps to a Joy that Never Goes Away*.” Face it – we are a lot more like Paul than mighty warriors.

#### IV. PAUL’S THORN

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells Paul’s story so well that I’m going to let her tell it this morning. She writes, “As best anyone can tell, Paul arrived in Corinth around 50 A.D. Over the next year and a half, he founded a church there. Once he was satisfied that the community was strong enough to survive without him, he set sail for Ephesus to go do the same thing all over again there. He stayed in touch with the Corinthians by mail, doing his best to instruct them long-distance, but it was not long before trouble set in. As soon as Paul left town, a new crowd of evangelists arrived in Corinth – Paul calls them “super-apostles” – they began to challenge his authority. Paul was crude, they said. He was volatile and manipulative. Everywhere he went he offended people, they said.

“The gist of their argument was that Paul did not exhibit the signs of a true apostle. He was short, weak, insecure and tactless. He did not work enough miracles. And he was always in trouble – in and out of jail, getting beaten up in public, always rubbing people the wrong way. Surely, the super-apostles suggested, God has better taste than that.

“Paul was undone by their criticism of him, especially since he knew it was true. He was short, weak, insecure, and tactless. He had never denied any of that, and it was as painful to him as it was to anyone else. But being an apostle had not been his idea. It was not as if he had campaigned for the job. God had forced it on him, slamming him on the ground one day and telling him what to do.

“No one was more aware than Paul of his weaknesses. He carried around a load of shame because of them, but the strange thing is – he did not try to hide them. When it came time to defend himself to the church in Corinth, he presented his weaknesses right along with the rest of his credentials. [Yes, Paul brought many strengths to the table. He could certainly boast about his trip fourteen years earlier to the third heaven – an experience so extraordinary that it, at the very least, ought to put him in league with the super-apostles.] But, Paul said,

“when he came back down to earth he landed on a thorn that had been sticking him ever since.

Whatever the thorn was, Paul could not get rid of it. Taylor continues, “I think that is what fascinates us – that this holy man, who had been to the third heaven and back, who was chosen by God to be the greatest missionary of all time – this spiritual giant had something going on with him that bugged him every day of his life. In other words, he was one of us.”<sup>1</sup>

But – as with Jesus’ prayer in the garden of Gethsemane – a thorn-free life was not to be. Paul would be accompanied by his thorn his whole life’s journey. “My grace is enough,” God said, “my power works best through your weakness.” Paul begged God not once but three times to take it away before finally making peace with it.

Everyone in this sacred space, from the Soloists/[Basses in the back row] to the worshippers in the balcony has, I imagine, prayed more times than that about the thorns that dig and irritate and distract. Weaknesses and thorns come in all shapes and sizes – emotional issues, health problems, relational struggles, an unending grief. The reality is they are with us for the long haul. Taylor puts it this way – “Every one of us suffers from some thorn or another. Every one of us has a shipwreck or two in our past, and every one of us has days – maybe even whole years – when we are short, weak, insecure and tactless.”<sup>2</sup> Do I hear an amen?

## V. EMBRACING WEAKNESS

Well, why is God so willing to let weakness and thorns “be” when all of us, Paul included, would prefer to have them go? Paul gives us a couple of hints in the text. First, he reports that his thorn kept him from getting what he calls “too elated” about his strengths. He’d been taken up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven for Pete’s sake – that alone should have gotten him a world tour and a mega-church. His weaknesses temper his strengths. If Paul was a bundle of strengths and no weaknesses, how quickly the church could have turned into the church of the Apostle Paul rather than the Church of Jesus Christ. If Paul was the “perfect” apostle, how quickly the church might have reverted to worshiping him – how quickly Paul might have reverted to worshiping himself. Paul was not concerned with a book tour, access to the White House, or selling out his mission for the sake of looking good. He was, as far as we can tell, short, weak, insecure, tactless, and there was the matter of that thorn – in other words, he was human, like you and I. As with Paul, weaknesses and thorns keep us honest about who we really are. And that is a relief. If God doesn’t demand perfection of us, perhaps we can relay some of God’s grace... even to ourselves.

Weakness also causes us to admit what most modern Americans cannot bear to acknowledge – our need for each other. Notice that one of the first things Jesus did was to gather up a cohort; that Paul traveled with at least one companion; that it was a congregation who commissioned and blessed the first ministries of the first Church. Community is foundational to the Christian life. The Christian faith is not a go-it-alone faith – my weakness requires your strength... and vice versa. My thorn requires your grace... and vice versa. What is the church if it is not a community of the weak, made strong by the power of Christ within us.

Weaknesses also keep us honest about who is God and who is not – they remind us that God is God, and we are not. When we are full of our own strength there is no room for God to move because we see no need for divine assistance. We are the sufficient ones. Only

when we admit to our weakness can we step out of the way and let God's strength take over. Paul put it this way – I am content with weaknesses, hardships, calamities – “for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” In other words, my weakness gets me out of the way so that God can work. Paul's response was to make peace with his weaknesses, to accept rather than fight his thorn. That doesn't mean he was delighted with it – but he didn't resign his apostleship in a bout of self-deprecation, he didn't built up a long-simmering resentment at God for not removing the thorn. No – struggling, oh-so-human Paul just kept on being faithful – as best he could, he kept on doing what God asked.

## **VI. A PARABLE**

Jack Riemer, wrote this Houston Chronicle article many years ago. Violinist Itzhak Perlman had given a concert in New York City.

He writes, “If you have ever been to a Perlman concert, you know that getting on stage is no small achievement for him. Stricken with polio as a child, Perlman has braces on both legs and walks with two crutches. To see him slowly walk across the stage is a sight. He walks painfully, yet majestically, until he reaches his chair. He sits down slowly, puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down and picks up the violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor and proceeds to play.

By now, the audience is used to this ritual. They sit quietly as he makes his way across the stage. They remain reverently silent while he undoes the clasps on his legs. They wait until he is ready to play. But on November 18<sup>th</sup>, something went wrong. Half-way through the piece, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap – it went off like gunfire. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. The orchestra stopped. There was no mistaking what Perlman had to do.

People who were there that night thought: “We figured that he would have to get up, put on the clasps again, pick up the crutches and limp his way off stage – to either find another violin or find another string for this one.” But he didn't. Instead, he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began, Perlman played from where he had left off. And he played inspired – with such passion and such power as they had never heard before. Of course, anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that, and you know that, but that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head. At one point, it sounded like he was re-tuning the strings to get sounds from them they hadn't made before.

When he finished, there was stunned silence. And then people rose and cheered. Applause burst from every corner. We were on our feet, screaming and cheering, doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had done.

Perlman smiled, wiped the sweat from this brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone, “You know, sometimes it is our task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.”

We, all of us are broken string people – thorn pierced people – not a perfect person in the room this morning. It is our task to find out how much God and we can do with what we have left. In good days or difficult, what we have left is God's commitment to us. Not to make us

mighty warriors or super stars, but regular old folk, weak folk, less than perfect folk – called to keep on being faithful – to as best we can keep on doing what God asks. God says to us, “My grace is sufficient – when you are weak, you are strong.”

Amen and amen.

Go now, broken-string people,  
thorn-pierced people,  
to be a people of strength,  
...a people of grace  
...a people of truth  
...a people of peace  
...a forgiving people  
... a loving people  
knowing that as you go, the God  
who loves you walks with you.  
In the name of the FSHS...  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way: Perfect in Weakness*, pp. 168-173.